

GREG THIELMANN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[This interview was not edited by Mr. Thielmann]

Q: Today is the 4th of November, 2004. This is an interview Greg, G-R-E-G, Thielmann. Is that pronounced correctly?

THIELMANN: No, that's Thielmann (Tealman).

Q: Thielmann. T-H-I-E-L-M-A-N-N. Well certainly to begin with, let's get a feel for when and where were you born?

THIELMANN: I was born in Des Moines, Iowa on March 14th, 1950, and my hometown for all the way through high school was Newton, Iowa about thirty miles from Des Moines.

Q: Could you tell me a bit about on your father's side and then your mother's side. Where did they come from and all?

THIELMANN: My father was born in Germany in 1900.

Q: Where? Do you know.

THIELMANN: He was born in a village called Gettorf Schleswig-Holstein to the north pretty close to the Baltic seacoast. His father was an innkeeper who then about the time the First World War broke out bought a farm, and then the two older brothers went off to war. Both of them were killed in the war, one in the west and one in the east. My father was then drafted at age eighteen and was on his way marching through Belgium when the war ended. The family joke is that if Armistice Day had been on say November 21 instead of November 11, we might not be here. So he then after the war, his father had to sell the farm because he didn't have enough labor to work on it. During the war interestingly they had French and Russian prisoners of war working on the farm. But they had to get rid of the farm in 1918. That was when they bought the inn apparently. My father was at the time in agricultural college. He got out and worked, tried to make a living in agriculture. It was about the time of the inflation of 1923 when he decided to basically leave the country as an economic refugee, going to America. So he went through Ellis Island in 1923 and took a train to North Dakota, sponsored by some uncle in the Americas, and then worked in various places around the Midwest, eventually becoming a chiropractor in Newton, Iowa, I think, from the 1930s on. Interestingly very early on before he decided on becoming a doctor, he had thought about joining the Foreign Service. I had a very interesting 1927 Foreign Service booklet with a sample exam for anyone interested in the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.

THIELMANN: Very interesting. But he quickly found out that he had not been a U.S. citizen long enough to apply and turned his attentions elsewhere.

Q: Becoming a chiropractor, does this mean, was this a college or vocational education. I mean what sort of education did he have?

THIELMANN: Chiropractors basically, to go to chiropractic college you have to have an undergraduate degree. My father finished up or got the equivalent of that in Iowa, and then he went to Lincoln Chiropractic College in Indianapolis, and they have additional, I think at the time it was maybe a few year to get a chiropractic degree and bought someone's practice in Iowa from there. That's how he ended up in the state.

Q: So this is what he, how long did he continue in this?

THIELMANN: He continued through his death in 1977 working this one practice in Newton, Iowa, interrupted only by World War Two when he was drafted at age forty-two and served in military intelligence because of his French, German and English.

Q: What about on your mother's side? What was her family name? Where did they come from?

THIELMANN: Her family name was Grimm, with two Ms. She grew up in the hillbilly country of Iowa, southern Iowa, the last row of the counties next to the Missouri border, Decatur County. Her father was a carpenter until a work accident put out one of his eyes, and he didn't have the distance measurement and he became a farmer, sort of a subsistence farmer. Those were very difficult times and Iowa's soil, the poorest in the country, and she had a really rough time. She was the only one in her family to go to college, and she started teaching at age eighteen, I think, in the country school in Iowa. Her summer jobs and her brothers helped put her through Iowa State Teacher's College, now UNI, Cedar Falls, Iowa. She eventually then ended up as a teacher in Newton, Iowa where she met my father having lost her voice one day and going to him with laryngitis. So the family joke is, if she hadn't lost her voice, they might never have hit it off because she likes to talk.

Q: What about, family life. Did your mother and father have other children?

THIELMANN: I have one older brother. So I was the second, second of the two.

Q: Did your mother keep teaching or did she stop teaching?

THIELMANN: She stopped teaching to raise us when we were young and then resumed when, I think I was in first grade, when she went back to school. Yeah, when she went back. She was a primary teacher. So she was in the same school I was, but thought it wasn't right that she be my teacher. So she moved around to avoid that. Would've started in first grade except that I was a first grader, but ended up in several elementary positions and continued teaching until she was retirement age. I think the number is twenty-seven and a half years as a teacher with that interruption as a mother in between.

Q: Well, we're talking about the '50s and the '60s particularly. What was Newton like? How do you describe Newton?

THIELMANN: Newton was an interesting and somewhat anomalous small town in Iowa because it had very heavy industrial employment. It was the home of Maytag washing machines, Maytag Company and several other industries. So that the town's population was 15,000, and it had something like 5,000 industrial workers and big unions, an unusual town in this respect. But it was typical Iowa in many other respects. There was one high school, one public high school. Everyone went to public high school. There was, I can say now looking back, a great homogeneity in terms of ethnicity. We had one Mexican American, one African American, one Jew, and we tended to forget that they were somehow different. I mean it was something that was in the back of your mind, but it was almost like there were too few to discriminate against. I didn't even learn about the pejorative terms for various ethnic groups until I left my hometown. My high school, my homecoming date was Tamara Grolnick, the one Jew in our class. I just, I mean it's really funny looking back on it. Joe Viela, our Mexican American, it just didn't really loom very large. So it was a funny place, and I'm not saying there wasn't discrimination. I mean, the discrimination I grew up with was more, "are you Catholic or Protestant. Do you live in the country club section of town or the rest of town." We were on the wrong side of the tracks - always somewhat marginal because chiropractic. This was a period when the AMA and drug industry were waging a full-scale war against chiropractics as quacks. There's always that sort of questionable piece. There was a little bit of leftover from my father's German origin. He had been accused of being a member of the Bund and other things in the years leading up to the war. So it was a good character building kind of education, I think.

Q: What, where did your family go religiously?

THIELMANN: My mother grew up Southern Baptist. My father was a Lutheran. So they compromised and went to the Disciples of Christ, First Christian Church.

Q: What about politically? Was this, were politics part of the sort of family life or-

THIELMANN: I would say, I would say no. Certainly my father was more, I would say, more apolitical. He was a registered Republican, but I almost think it was more because that was a respectable thing to be as a doctor in a small town. That's the appropriate class response. I see him as being very open minded on things like theology, and he actually had kind of a combination of Hindu and Christianity. He was a yogi from the 1950s. The picture on his bureau was of Paramhansa Yogananda, his guru, which I as a kid thought was Jesus. He had long hair and everything. He went to church faithfully every Sunday. I'm not clear he always stayed awake, but he was very conventional in so many respects. He was very sort of northern German in terms of schedule and routine. We always had breakfast right at seven o'clock.

Q: Keep to the clock.

THIELMANN: Yeah. I think order was important to him. Yet he had very unconventional views about religion, and I think it was important in growing up to have the sense that it was okay to have unconventional thoughts about politics and the world and everything. I look back and think that it seems like my career involved a number of points at which I was willing to be more outspoken and dissenting than maybe some of my colleagues. I think a lot of that came from that early formative period. My mother was very outspoken, probably too outspoken in telling other people her views on any number of issues. So that sort of feistiness and my dad's unconventional attitudes I think made an impression.

Q: What about sort of around the dinner table. Were there discussions about happenings in town or the world or issues or anything like that? Was there-

THIELMANN: I think, it was more happenings around town than around the world. Although because my father had two sisters in Germany and we would get these crinkly letters in old German script and marks upon, seemed to have cardboard on the bottom of it you were supposed to eat and this sort of strange foreignness was part of growing up. One of the family friends that we would visit every couple of months in the Amana Colonies, Bavarian watchman who immigrated to the United States in 1920s. His wife and then the former German imperial German army captain of the machine gun company and then later a pacifist and theologian, they all lived together in the same house. We would visit them and the old man with no teeth and Bavarian accent would be chattering away in German. My dad would nod and only later told me that he hardly understood a word he was saying. But there was that knowledge of my dad's German roots, and he had a number of friends who had also emigrated from Germany, from Schleswig-Holstein in fact, and had farms here and there. So he was never a German-American. He would never have hyphenated his name, I think, but he was a German-American for most other people.

One of the things I would observe about Germans is that most of the immigrants had a very strong assimilation urge, and my dad certainly did as well. He worked very hard on his English, and I think did so well that I could not hear any accent although some others could. But about half the people I'd ask couldn't identify any kind of foreign accent, which is not bad for someone coming to the U.S. at age twenty-three - kind of unusual. So that was to me one sign of his assimilation instinct and to his desire to become a citizen, a good decent law abiding citizen and do what you're supposed to do as the loyal American.

Q: What about, was there, did you read much or was there much reading around the house at all or on your own?

THIELMANN: There was a lot of reading around the house. My dad would always seem to have some reading by at his chair in the living room. A lot of times it was more abstract religious matters that always seemed uninteresting to me as a kid, but reading from my mother's emphasis on reading as a basic skill to just reading in general seemed to be a big part of my growing up. I had an early interest in what was happening in the world. I'm sure stimulated by my father's foreign origins. But I would pore over the kind of magazines that one looks at as a teenager and became an early newspaper reader.

Q: Now what was the newspaper in Des Moines, the Register?

THIELMANN: The newspaper was the Des Moines Register, which I would claim looking back on it was one of the best newspapers for a city of 200-some thousand in the entire country. I have this distinct memory of walking by the Des Moines Register's printing office in Des Moines, which had a big showcase window, and you could watch the presses run from the street. There was a sign in the window that said, "One newspaper has won more Pulitzer prizes than the Des Moines Register. Our compliments to the New York Times." I suspect that most of them were agricultural reporting although they did have a famous, actually two famous political cartoonists, James Darling and Frank Miller. But looking back on the '60s when I really first started paying attention to newspapers, I think today that it was an outstanding newspaper, which has gotten steadily worse over the years. It's now Gannett-style.

Q: Yes, I haven't heard much, but it used to be, but yeah, when you think about as I've traveled around. I'm sure you have in the States, you go to cities like San Francisco or Houston or something you feel as though you've fallen off the edge of the world. I mean-

THIELMANN: San Francisco is my favorite example for the ratio of cosmopolitan citizens to crummy newspapers. It's just huge.

Q: Yes, I mean go to Houston. Terrible. I mean, and then you grew up in a place that had really a major newspaper, small state and all that.

THIELMANN: It was called "the newspaper that Iowa depends on." It was delivered every day. The trucks would go out of Des Moines in the middle of the night to every one of Iowa's 99 counties. It would be there in the morning when people woke up. It was one of those things which in a lot of ways bound the state together. I mean this was a state that, if you were in Council Bluffs, Iowa, you would think Omaha would be your orbit. If you were in Davenport, you could just as easily be in Moline or Chicago, and the same with cities like Sioux City on the Missouri River. In fact the state was very much influenced by this paper out of Des Moines, which is more or less in the center of the state.

Q: Well, in the school and let's take sort of the early, well the fifties, you really get going by 1960. I guess you're what by that time ten years old or so? Did the political campaign of 1960 hit your town or school? This was Kennedy versus Nixon.

THIELMANN: Yes. It certainly did, but my memories of it were kind of influenced by sort of learning my identity with the Republican Party. Both my parents were Republicans at that point even though my mother came out of a sort of rural populace tradition and still remembers her father talking about William Jennings Bryant. But they were both Republicans. So I had this vague notion that Nixon was a good guy, and Kennedy was the one who shouldn't win. Then, when Kennedy narrowly won, there was this issue of Cook County.

Q: The votes.

THIELMANN: Yeah, the votes there, and it seemed to me as someone just barely on the edge of starting to pay attention to politics that something vaguely bad had happened. I would say that, because of the influence of the small town, Republicanism and my parents, that all the way through Kennedy's assassination, if someone had asked me, I would've said that Kennedy was not a good president. It's funny looking back on it now because I have a different view of it.

Q: How did you do in school? I mean, with your mother being in the same school with you, was this a problem or not?

THIELMANN: No, it really wasn't. It was only a problem when, for example, I was talking in class and sent to the office and sitting in the corner of the office, and my mother came in for some sort of business and looks around. There was sort of the humiliation. It wasn't so much hers. She was looking down, askance at me, but to me it was humiliating to be the son of a teacher and getting in trouble - sort of like a pastor's child, I suppose. But in most respects she made sure that she wasn't in a position of authority over me as a student. So that really wasn't a problem. It was just a great asset to have someone for whom learning was very important. As an example, I remember when I was in second grade, the math teacher had the addition and subtraction tables on a big poster on the wall, and somehow I learned early on what the answers were supposed to be as she would go down the first line and the second line. But I just remembered what the answers were and not how you got them. So, when she scrambled it or used cards instead, I, of course, knew nothing. I still remember my mother being so shocked that I had somehow failed to understand this. She got cards and drilled me at home and so forth. So it basically was not acceptable not to learn in my household. I think that the expectations were very high for both me and my brother.

Q: Well, what about the elementary level and we'll move to the high school level. But elementary level, what about the Iowa school system. How did you seem to find it at the time and in retrospect?

THIELMANN: At the time, of course, it was the only school system that I knew, and it was for me always a pleasure. I liked being a student. I think back on my teachers, and I can't think of any of my teachers that I had a real problem with as being a terrible teacher. I was fortunate in that respect. I can't be totally objective about it now. I could think of a couple I think were really exceptionally good teachers in elementary school. But my generalization about Iowa is that it's a state which has always held education as being important. Cynics might say it's because it's so boring there's nothing else to do. But for whatever reason it's where the citizens support bond issues, where the teachers are respected even if not paid in the top twentieth percentile or whatever. I think that in general I benefited from my education all the way through, at a fairly good public school even though it certainly could not hold up to those offering Chinese. Only French was offered when I was growing up. I did have two years of Latin in junior high, and that today sounds very exotic. But that was just what one did at the time even if vaguely college bound.

Q: Well, then how about high school?

THIELMANN: High school was important to me in a number of ways. I think it was a time when I really started to get an understanding and a real fascination with foreign affairs. Of course for me the big foreign affairs issue was Vietnam. I was an early reader of what was happening. Looking back on it I can't say that I chose good sources. I was an early reader of Reader's Digest and U.S. News. That's how I learned about the war. But, I remember, I was very impressed in high school about A.A. Acheson. He seemed to me to be one of the greatest, most eloquent public figures in the world.

Q: Foreign minister of Israel.

THIELMANN: Right. It deceived me in a way because I became so knowledgeable in a superficial way about what was happening Vietnam, where this or that military unit was, and how many planes were shot down over the north. When I got into college and started debating people because I basically thought this was the patriotic thing. We were fighting a good cause to save South Vietnamese democracy. My enlightenment on the issue actually was delayed because I seemed to know more about the people on the other side of the issue among my contemporaries. I can even think back on things that are very embarrassing to me now doing a sermon at my church on how religiously appropriate it was to be in Vietnam, sort of the Christian perspective on Vietnam - following the lead of Billy Graham at the time. Jesus would've been a hawk or something like that Billy Graham said. So that's how I would describe myself in high school, an active teenage Republican, a supporter of Goldwater in '64, although I have to say that even then I was an enthusiastic follower of Bill Scranton during his last minute effort to provide an alternative to the conservative Goldwater. I remember being in Des Moines, Scranton's first stop after announcing his candidacy. But in most respects I would have been identified from the outside as a fairly typical bright, college bound sort of Republican from small town Iowa. That was pretty much my worldview.

Q: In reading by the time you're in high school, were there any particular books that you cared for or authors that you sort of remember?

THIELMANN: As you ask the question, I don't remember what I was reading at the time. I think that I was certainly reading both fiction and non-fiction, but I really can't remember. I have memories of things like my English teacher in high school getting us to read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I think in retrospect I was not ready for *The Brothers Karamazov*. I think in a lot of ways I was not mature. I don't know if I was more or less mature than others my age. I mean, when I think about my own daughter and her maturity level, her intellectual maturity level in high school, I'm sort of astounded when thinking what I was reading at the age she's now reading. It seems like she is two or three years at least ahead of me as assignments go.

Q: Did radio or TV or movies, were these good sources of the things you were interested in?

THIELMANN: I'd say they were, and I paid careful attention to the commercial news. I mean, Huntley and Brinkley were an important part of my maturation as a consumer of news. I liked going to movies. I remember the movie *The Graduate*, loomed very large.

Q: Dustin Hoffman. Classics.

THIELMANN: Classics. It's the kind of movie that you saw several times and just made an incredible impression on people in their mid teens at the time. Dr. Zhivago was another movie that made a very large impact on me.

Q: Dating, I mean, how did that work in those days? Did you, did one go steady?

THIELMANN: Not well. In those days some of my friends had steady girlfriends, but in my high school, in my crowd, we were a mostly unsuccessful group of people who were very much interested in girls but just hadn't quite gelled. So we would spend a lot of time talking in theory.

Q: Welcome to the club.

THIELMANN: So in my understanding now there was a great blessing at the time to be not particularly active dating girls because I had a very close friendship with three other guys. We used to be four other guys but one of them started dating regularly and kind of moved out of our circle. But we'd spend a lot of time sort of driving around or watching thunderstorms or playing pool at one of our friend's houses. I think the quality of that friendship when I talk to other people about who they're in touch with or what they did, was a little unusual. So I'm very grateful now that it came to me a little bit later.

Q: Well, I take it from your family and all that there is no doubt about you were college bound.

THIELMANN: Yes, that's I think very much the case. I don't think there was ever any interest in any alternative.

Q: Were you doing summer jobs or after school jobs?

THIELMANN: I had a paper route when I was younger. This was, in my case, an afternoon paper route. That's where I got my first experience earning money. But then in high school I graduated to a job in a grocery store that was only a block away. That included operating the cash register, sacking groceries and stocking shelves. I tend to think I learned most of my work ethic from that experience. Fortunately I learned to do this in the Midwest where you learn the customer is always right and a certain sense of service that I'm not sure is matched on the East Coast.

Q: Did you have any idea from your teachers or family and all where you wanted to go to school and kind of what you wanted to be?

THIELMANN: I had a vague sense from high school that I'd like to do something in international affairs. In terms of schools, I look back and think that I was not terribly ambitious in my thinking and very ignorant about what kind of choices there were. I was fortunate in that my brother went to Grinnell College, which is twenty miles down the road, a very good, small, private liberal arts school. It's the best in Iowa, the best school Iowa had.

Q: It's a major, it has national renown.

THIELMANN: Yes, that's right and now they've got a huge endowment, which I'm not sure they had at the time. But it was one of only three schools to which I applied. The others were University of Iowa and Simpson College, all in Iowa. None of them bad schools, but interesting to me that my ambitions did not extend beyond living at the most eighty miles from my home. So ended up going to Grinnell, and it was there that I really encountered the wider world since Grinnell even at that time, the majority of students came from Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, the large metropolitan areas.

Q: You were at Grinnell from when to when?

THIELMANN: From 1968 to '72.

Q: Well, could you describe, well, talk about the Vietnam experience, feeling then, but first, how did you find Grinnell? I mean, what was it like in those days?

THIELMANN: I'll try not to talk too long on this subject but-

Q: Oh no. I find it interesting because when we're doing this, we might as well be picking up social and educational history too.

THIELMANN: Grinnell had always had a reputation for social activism. It was part of the social gospel school of Protestants. It was founded by people who came out of New England theological seminaries, and I think they saw it as part of their mission to bring education to the wilderness. It was a school founded in 1846. Started out in Davenport on the Mississippi. They decided it was too much wickedness and sin there-

Q: Well.

THIELMANN: And pulled it farther away. But it was a school that was always ahead of the social issues of the day; things that later became accepted were certainly not accepted at the time. Some very learned professors were at the school. So it had that kind of reputation. It was one of the first schools to have a lot of women, coed education. One of the houses there was the oldest women's residence dorm west of the Mississippi. They remembered things as the oldest this and that. When I went there it was a time of course of great social turmoil, 1968. Thinking back on it, my freshman year in 1968 was just incredible. For one thing, when I started out as a freshman, they had a rule that women could be in men's rooms for only three hours on Sunday. You always had to keep the door open. By the end of that year, they had dropped all visitation hours. It went through several transitions but toward that eventual outcome. There was very early into my first semester an encounter between Blythe Draper a representative of Playboy Magazine who for some reason was on campus talking about his magazine. He encountered students that I think had been organized by Students for a Democratic Society. Ten of them took off all their clothes in front of him. In something that was might be questioned in terms of the clarity of the message, they were protesting Playboy's exploitation of women as sex objects. For small town Iowa this was a rather extraordinary development. It was made worse from the perspective of most Iowans by the fact that there was a photographer present who provided pictures of full frontal nudity to the underground press at the time. So people in New York and everywhere were seeing the naked students of Grinnell College in Iowa. This became a cause celebre in the state as well with the state attorney general, a conservative Republican, seizing the papers as pornography and trying to suppress publication. But others were found to publish the paper. The attorney general's name was Richard Turner, and I remember one of the next headlines of the newspaper, which is called the Pterodactyl was "Pig Turner seizes Pterodactyl." So that was their news story. This gained a lot of notoriety.

But at the same time all this was happening, I have this memory of the homecoming celebration at Grinnell, a football game, that brought back a lot of alumni. The halftime ceremony was the traditional time when the woman chosen by the football team to be the homecoming queen was crowned. The crowning ceremony had begun when all of a sudden out of the corner of the field came a convertible with someone who I think was named Sid the Kid Melman from New York. He was gay and he was the homecoming queen. He came out with I think a garland on his hair. He was throwing kisses to the crowd and coming across the field with all these sort of hippies in tow throwing flowers or whatever. This didn't go over well with the alumni at the time. Nor did the raising of the Vietcong flag, an alternative flag raising.

So that was the kind of environment I had - great generational alienation. Most of my friends and acquaintances at Grinnell seemed not to want to go back home during break or at Thanksgiving or whatever. They seemed to be alienated from their parents. I got along fine with my parents and certainly wanted to see them often if for no other reason because home was the convenient place to do laundry.

Q: Well, absolutely.

THIELMANN: I think it went just beyond the laundry. I really enjoyed the company of my parents and that seemed like a natural thing to do. So I had some culture clashes myself and was sort of a dissenter from my early times as a member-. I think I was treasurer of the college Republicans at the time and really only about halfway through my college career when I more or less joined the mainstream there in terms of opposing the war and actually changed parties at the end of 1971. John Lindsay became a Democrat. I followed and ended up going to the Iowa precinct caucuses voting for McGovern in 1972 in the middle of a blizzard. So I went through a lot of changes during that time. I'm sure they were very much brought about, not just by the students that I went to school with and with whom I often disagreed on both political issues and cultural issues, but as part of the whole process of opening my mind to thinking about things in a different way and to the efforts of college professors to make me think rigorously about questions and issues, which I think were mostly successful.

Q: How did you find the faculty dealt with this because I mean within this, you might say the anti-war, anti-establishment movement, it always struck me - I'm considerably older so I was already into the Foreign Service by that time. But they were young people who were trying on their spurs as leading people and trying to get them to do things and it was just sort of almost being against your parents, which is always great for kids.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: I mean, how, did you find, and a lot of it is they couldn't care less about education. Mainly it was to, it seemed to be a lot was to disrupt and education was the place to be.

THIELMANN: Yes, well, there was that strong component I think of what was going on. When I look back on it, I did not go to Vietnam, but I see myself as profoundly a member of the Vietnam generation. It colored my four years of college so much. I went to school with a lot of people who I think would not have chosen to go to school at that point in their lives, but they had to postpone being drafted. It was a student body, which looking back was full of fear. I mean, the males there, I think, all of us were worried at one level - some level of our consciousness - about dying in Vietnam. That was where young people were bound or so it seemed, and the war was just getting worse and worse, higher and higher casualties, as I moved through most of my years of college. I think that made apolitical students very political. It influenced their views about the U.S. roles in the world that would've been entirely different if it hadn't involved their own lives, and it was something that made alienation with parents over things like hair length so much deeper. I mean, my first roommate in college was someone who right before going to college had gone to Woodstock.

Q: A musical festival in New York.

THIELMANN: That's right.

Q: In '67, I think it was.

THIELMANN: Which was a major cultural event. So or maybe it was even December of '68 [ed note: August 15-18, 1969] because I think, just as I was getting to know him, he was coming off of that experience - being part of that - which seemed rather impressive to me that he could've actually been in the crowd. So the whole thrust of the student body at Grinnell, which is clearly Iowa's most radical institution, was a very important part of it. It was a school where there was a hiding of wealth and privilege in one's family rather than a flaunting of it. The uniform of the student was a work shirt and jeans, and makeup was really verboten [forbidden]. Clothing was sort of deliberately almost asexual. This was what I learned instead of the frat school kind of education that seemed to be featured in other places. So it was in that environment in which when I eventually came around on the war. I joined the march through Des Moines to the state house to somehow get them to stop the war; which made no sense, because in the process it alienated a lot of Iowans due to the obscene shouting and everything. I learned some early lessons about what works and what doesn't work. I remember a much more effective candlelight, silent walk through Grinnell, Iowa, after the invasion of Cambodia which I thought at the time had a much greater chance of winning converts.

Q: I remember the candlelight thing because I was consul general in Saigon when a couple of American students who hitchhiked around ended up in Saigon. They had their candles out, and they had a superfluity of TV cameras around.

Q: How did the faculty handle this and then we'll talk about what courses you were taking. But how did the faculty handle this?

THIELMANN: I think they handled it very well because although there were a lot of expectations of students to perform, there was also some leniency too in that the faculty. This was a small college. The faculty knew students. They knew that the students were actively involved in things and that it would probably be better to be lenient in terms of deadlines and everything. That had been my experience for the most part. The college shut down early in 1970 following Kent State and Jackson State. It was really very much along the lines of the Ivy League. A lot of our professors came out of the Ivy League. This was sort of the proper reaction at the time to what was happening in the country. As a student at that point, I felt differently. I felt a lot of money was being spent on my education, there was much to get from my education that spring, and I was being deprived of it by the school shutting down. So I was out there demonstrating against shutting the college down when most of the students who had been very emotionally and physically involved in protest activity were realizing that deadlines on papers and tests loomed. They weren't ready for it. So they had a personal stake in the shutdown and extended deadlines as well as their ideological feelings about the war. I still have no apologies for my protesting at the time and am sorry the college shut down early. But I'm not sure it was the wrong decision because emotions were running very high. A lot of the professors themselves, as mature and sophisticated as they were, were pretty overwrought about what was happening and did things that were really unparalleled for them in terms of their careers, feeling that the nation had to adopt a different course on these issues.

Q: Well, was there a gap between you might say the tenured professors and the instructors?

THIELMANN: Yes. There may have been at the time but, as a student, I didn't have that level of sophistication. There were certainly divisions in the faculty. There was a classics professor for example, who after the students turned the American flag upside down in the international distress signal, staged an all morning protest in which he hugged the flag and prevented any student from doing that. That was one of the cases when faculty members clearly did not join in what was happening on the campus. There were others, like a professor I had for a course in Marxism at the school, who felt differently about it. There were varying degrees of involvement. But it was not a uniform movement of faculty encouraging what the students were doing.

Q: But you didn't, I take it, suffer the problems that happened in some of the major universities when the students took over buildings and trashed them and that sort of thing.

THIELMANN: There wasn't much you could do at Grinnell, but there was a little bit of that. There was an occupation of buildings over I think race issues, or women's issues. Pretty radical and disturbing to a lot of the people on campus to see offices seized. The only thing that really parallels though what was happening in some other colleges is Grinnell had a very small Air Force ROTC attachment. I was actually a member until I did not pass the physical that would've allowed me to get a full Air Force scholarship to Grinnell College, which was a lot of money at the time. It would've also have been a route for me to have the kind of Vietnam service that I thought was inevitable after college in a different way than like an infantry draftee would have. That small Air Force ROTC operation or detachment operated out of a small building on the edge of campus, which was then seized by the students in a march that had a lot of really inflated rhetoric at the beginning like, you know, women and children first. They won't shoot women and children. We ended up there at the - when I say we, I think I was a witness but not a participant. They went to this building, which was just a house with a porch on it and everything, and were met by the chief of police in the town, who was very much like Andy Griffith. He was all alone, sort of crossed his hands. "I'm afraid that if you go in here I'm going to have to arrest you," he said. So that was enough to stop this crowd. It just kind of milled around and swarmed around the chief of police. Someone broke a window. Because of the density of the crowd, Chief Peters couldn't really do anything about, but even after they broke the window, got into the building and seized it. They left money to pay for the broken glass afterwards, and it was kind of comical in retrospect, but it was what the people in the school thought appropriate given the national emergency. They succeeded in getting the ROTC off campus. But the funny thing was, the Air Force which had been making an exception every year for this very small detachment, just said, "we're removing the exception." It was like the Air Force said, "you can't fire us; we quit." They pulled out. That too was an occasion for me protesting that what are you guys doing to the Air Force here. You don't want Grinnell College officers. You want only Brigham Young University and the kind of officers that Lieutenant Calley represents. So I thought then and I think still it was a mistake. What they should have done was to maybe change the requirements for getting commissioned as an Air Force officer. Maybe the Air Force shouldn't have been teaching anything. But to just kick them off, I thought, was exactly the kind of fuzzy-minded thinking my fellow students were famous for.

Q: Well, an awful lot of people exercise immature power.

THIELMANN: Yes. That's a good way to put it.

Q: How did your parents feel about all this?

THIELMANN: Well, I'm sure my mother in particular thought that this had been a very big mistake to send us to a place where we would get all these crazy notions. So she was pretty upset at a lot of the things that were happening and at the bad influences on me as a student - on me and my brother. My brother was actually also a student at Grinnell two years ahead of me. He became an Air Force officer, but his commissioning ceremony had to be held three miles away from town, at the outskirts protected from disruption by the Iowa Highway Patrol. That was the kind of an atmosphere in 1970 when he graduated.

Q: Did you come home with long hair?

THIELMANN: My hair was never really long. It was over the ears kind of long, but nothing that quite aroused the very hostile automatic reaction from a lot of Iowans that shoulder length hair did.

Q: Hair was terribly important. I remember talking in 1970 to a brigadier general at one of the bases in Vietnam, Qui Nhon or something like that. He said when he got there, they said, "Thank God you've come. You've got to settle a dispute." And he thought how am I going to deal with the possible attack of the Vietcong on the base but it was where sideburns could come on the soldiers' hair. I mean, this turned into quite a classic. What about plain education? What were you getting? I mean what was your subject? What were your interests?

THIELMANN: My major was political science, and I felt very fortunate for having a good political science mentor. The professor Jim McGee who taught the international affairs at Grinnell was I think someone who had a profound understanding of how international affairs works. I really think I gained a lot from that exposure. Some of my best education though was not only in my chosen career field. I had a terrific humanities course, which was at the time required of everyone. It was partly a writing class, but it was two semesters. One would read the classics from Odyssey and the Iliad to Paradise Lost, a lot of thing that I might not otherwise have read. It was a tremendous intellectual adventure when I think back on it. My professor in this class, Emmett Foster, graded very hard. My first semester grade was I think a C+. He gave hardly any A's, but it was such an exciting intellectual environment. I mean, it was a real high just to go through that class. They would normally switch to other professors at the end of first semester. You take humanities from another professor. I transferred into another class, and at first kind of realized that I could at least get a decent grade in this other class. But then after only one class I thought, no, I'm losing the tremendous education. So I went back to Emmett Foster's class. There were a number of classes that I think even to this day, really helped me to unfold my understanding of the way the world works. One on revolution and revolutionaries was so useful to me throughout my career. When I look back, I can think of a few courses I took at Grinnell that were kind of duds or just very mediocre. But for the most part they were very educational experiences, and they were taught by professors who really cared about their students and the way they understood the subject.

Q: Well, just, to capture the period, I've been disturbed by how in the last decade or so international relations, basically political science, I mean, so much a part of political science has been turned into models.

THIELMANN: Quantification.

Q: Quantification, to my mind has sort of destroyed the basis. I mean, and have absolutely no value for those of us who are essentially practitioners. I may be wrong but how did you, it sounds like you were there at a golden period when they were talking about the real world.

THIELMANN: Well, I really felt that, and I have had a little exposure in recent years as a guest of other professors. I'm a political science major whose advice would be to people who want to prepare themselves for a career in foreign affairs is to become a history major because I too feel that political science as a discipline has become so quantified and so oriented to applying the lessons of electoral politics, where quantification has some utility, to a lot of questions that really can't be quantified. Or else they can be quantified, but it doesn't get to the heart of an understanding of the issue. So it adds some peripheral understanding of something that's happened. So I'm not sure, I can't say this as a faculty member or as a scholar. But I really don't think that I would find a lot of the presentations at a political science convention to be terribly interesting to me or terribly relevant to the world that I know about as a practitioner. History is almost always relevant to me.

Q: Yes. Well, it's basically the same essentially the same study as political science except it's on a more personal level, I think.

THIELMANN: And once you don't try to over-generalize it.

Q: I know. Well, as you were doing this, what about the world beyond since we're talking about foreign affairs eventually. Did the world intrude much outside of Vietnam? I mean, but that was almost a different matter.

THIELMANN: Yes, that was certainly the big intrusion that entered our personal lives. But I mean other things happening in Europe with the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) alliance and everything entered my focus as well. I guess at the time environmental issues were starting to enter our consciousness as being global issues worthy of study. But it really was, it really was dominated by the Vietnam and even things that I learned at the time about Russia and China and the tensions between Russia and China were more kind of through the relevance of those issues to Vietnam. I mean, so obsessed was I and probably a lot of my colleagues on what was happening in the war there. I do remember-this is jumping ahead a little bit-but I remember in my oral exam in entering the foreign service they asked me about which areas of the world that I thought that I had some particular knowledge in. I identified Asia and Europe. Then they asked me these questions about Latin America - Peruvian fishing rights - that I didn't know much about.

Q: Oh dirty tricks.

THIELMANN: I also remember that Latin America was in my memory at the time in looking at those jobs from the first that were available in my entering the Foreign Service class, Latin America came in dead last on the list of places in the world I would find interesting to go to. Of course that's where I went.

Q: Well, were you pointed towards something as you were outside of hoping that the war would be over?

THIELMANN: I think in a way I was already pointing a little bit to my later interest in political/military affairs and arms control, and I don't know whether it was playing with toy soldiers as a boy or whatever. I think the security issue did even then particularly really interest me.

Q: Did you get much in the way of military history?

THIELMANN: I would say no, not specifically and not even in graduate school. I didn't really have a rigorous education in military history. To the extent that I learned about it was just reading on my own.

Q: You find that interesting?

THIELMANN: I do now. I mean, it's hard to know which really came first what the relationship is. My professional responsibilities, my private interest. But the subject of war, how it is fought and how it is avoided is probably my most consuming professional and personal interests.

Q: Well, did you get involved in extracurricular activities.

THIELMANN: Not to a major extent. I was not in athletics. In high school I was in debate, a debate program. Looking back on high school that was also one of those programs that had been a very big influence on me in terms of how one presents information even things like learning to eliminate non-fluencies, uh and um and those things, which I remember used to be part of my presentational style. But I was told that this was undesirable and I deliberately chose to eliminate that.

Q: Well, you graduated in '72, wasn't it?

THIELMANN: 1972.

Q: What were you planning, what happened?

THIELMANN: Well, I had no military obligation, both because I did not pass the ROTC physical, and also I got draft number 352 when they had the lottery. So I was free of a military obligation and got what I most wanted at that point, I was accepted by the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton coming out of Grinnell College, which was a very happy development. They offered among other things a full tuition scholarship package, and it was prestigious, and only one out of ten applicants were accepted. So I was very happy about that. And also the Woodrow Wilson School encouraged people to take time off if they so chose, feeling that the graduate experience would be richer if people had real world experience. So I did take a year off between undergraduate school and graduate school and did a number of things. I worked as a park ranger in the summer. It was my second, my third summer doing that, working at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. Then I went to work as a district field representative for then Congressman John Culver in Iowa. That was in a lot of ways a campaign job. I didn't quite realize at the time the problems with being paid by the government for a campaign job. But that's really what it was. After that I went to Germany to study at the Goethe institute for two months, February and March in the winter. Then I traveled around Europe a little bit, came back, spent time with my friends at Grinnell, just sort of hanging out, even typing papers for a couple of friends in need. I guess then the following summer was my third summer as a park ranger. The one before was the second summer. So I basically spent that whole year in between doing different things in each quarter, and it was a very good experience for me. It was just what I needed at the time - to take a break and to recharge my batteries and get fired up for that graduate school.

Q: Germany was your first real foreign affairs experience, I mean foreign experience.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: Where did you go? The Goethe Institute?

THIELMANN: That was at a town called Ebersberg outside of Munich, and that was the last station stop on one of the - I forget what we want to call it - one of those mass transit systems out of Munich. It was for the most part a rural Bavarian village but with fairly easy access to Munich. Most of the fellow students there were Swiss from the French and Italian speaking parts and a few other kinds of Europeans. It was a pretty good way to learn German, except that my friends would usually speak Italian outside of class and that didn't do me much good. But that was actually my second experience in Germany. Because my first experience was going over in the summer as a nineteen-year-old to work in a German grocery store for a month as a foreign worker at sixty-two cents an hour and to meet my German aunts for the first time. I did a month working at the store, spent some time with one of my elderly aunts, visited some of the other people in Oldenburg, Germany who had gone to school with my father and learning a little bit about his life from that perspective and then traveling around Germany a bit. That was my first formative foreign experience. I flew on Luxembourg, I mean Icelandic Airlines.

Q: Icelandic.

THIELMANN: Through Luxembourg in a Rolls-Royce turboprop forever across the Atlantic. And had that teenage living in Europe experience that it seemed like so many Americans had at the time of stand-by and relatively cheap flights to Europe, which was another tremendous experience for seeing America from outside and the different perspective, which I'm sure just increased my interest in getting some kind of job that would allow me to do that professionally.

Q: Well, then you're Woodrow Wilson from what, seventy-

THIELMANN: '73 to '75.

Q: '73. What were your, how did the school work? I mean, how did you find it?

THIELMANN: Two-year program, about fifty students in each of the classes. And the school would basically find some kind of employment for the students during the intervening summer. So I remember in my case I was going to be working as an intern at our embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. But then that kind of fell through because Afghanistan was getting so dangerous some time before the summer came. I can't remember whether Spike Dubs, the ambassador there, was assassinated in Afghanistan.

Q: I think it was, I think around '79 because-

THIELMANN: Yes, it was after-

Q: It was close to the Soviet invasion.

THIELMANN: It was after that summer, but I mean obviously the security situation was such that they didn't want to have some intern to worry about. I remember reading up on a favorite Afghan sport, which is to pass a calf carcass between riders. So I was getting ready for that very exotic life, and then it was not possible. I heard about this other opportunity working as an intern on the policy planning staff at the State Department, which is an incredibly good job. I'd really have to say as exotic as Afghanistan would've been that I could not have had a better summer than being part of Winston Lord's policy planning staff at a time when Kissinger was Secretary of State. That was one of those occasional golden periods of policy planning when I found that perfect balance between being actively involved in policy but still taking one step down the road as regards implications.

Q: This was when?

THIELMANN: This was summer of '74.

Q: Well first how was Winston? Did you see, I mean at least from a distance how he operates?

THIELMANN: Yes, at least from my perspective, which was only as an intern, but he was very impressive. I'm sure in a lot of subconscious ways he was a role model for me in terms of how to run an office. He was attentive and kind to insignificant fellows such as myself. He was very temperate and calm in a very high stress job. He would share with the staff an ounce of what he was finding out in his conversations with Kissinger that made it exciting to be a part of it. This was of course the time when Kissinger wasn't even telling his assistant secretary a lot of things that were going on. But he was discrete. I'm sure he didn't tell us things that Kissinger was trying to keep very close to the vest, but you had a sense of involvement. There was an incredible collection of people at the time on policy planning staff. I was assigned to Willard De Pree who later became the ambassador to Africa, and he was doing internal budget work. The policy planning staff was kind of involved in sitting in on the internal budget process. There was Anton Duport who is still a personal friend today and who was doing European issues. John Kornblum was kind of the in-house European expert. There was Jerry Kahan who later on was a deputy assistant secretary of state for whom I worked. He was, I think, working on Middle Eastern issues at the time. Reggie Bartholomew came in toward the end of the summer. Tom Simon was there on the policy planning staff. I'm sure I'm leaving someone off. Bill Newbert who left at the end of the summer or the middle of the summer for Leningrad to become a consul general there was one, as fate would have it, his son moved in down the street from us in Arlington, Virginia. I am now the godfather of his daughter and Joe Newbert's granddaughter. It's amazing to, it was very funny as this realization unfolded. It wasn't immediate. But I kind of remembered this picture that I treasure of Winston Lord at a farewell dinner at the Foreign Service Club. On one side of Winston Lord was Joe Newbert going off to Leningrad and the other side intern Greg Thielmann. This was a very heady and special experience in my memory at the time.

Q: What sort of things were you doing?

THIELMANN: I was basically an assistant to De Pree and helping him prepare budget information and comments on the various bureaus' spending plans. But it was one of those jobs where I was also the go-fer and had access to various other members of the policy planning staff. Many of them enjoyed talking to the interns. I would learn from them. Richard Finn was the guy responsible for East Asian affairs. I had respect for his understanding of issues too, but one of the things that became pretty obvious was that there wasn't going to be any kind of free and open thinking about Vietnam. This is something that Kissinger was controlling tightly. He didn't need much help in the grand scheme of things. In the summer because I was still sort of obsessed with Vietnam, I would pay attention to the things crossing my desk - cables from Saigon, hearings by Graham Martin coming back and talking about the future budget needs of the embassy. I had this sense that so much of the information here was an unreal world. It didn't seem to me to correspond with what I was reading about, what was happening in Vietnam. For example, Graham Martin and was it Lehman, his deputy - they were testifying to the Congress about how the aging leaders of North Vietnam had lost touch with reality. That they presented budgets in which the war costs were basically winding down because we were winning, and it was sort of the last gasp of the Communists in North Vietnam as long as we persevered and didn't cut and run. Well, even from the stuff I was seeing, it seemed to me like things were getting pretty tough in the northern part of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese regulars were pouring in. They seemed to be building airbases and everything inside South Vietnam. So in leaving that summer it seemed to me that someone needed to say that. I talked to Finn about it. I learned very quickly that this was really not something that would be welcomed. To point out these things would not be welcomed. It was almost "like yeah, of course, that's true, but what can you do with that information." Well, I had nothing to lose so as an intern, I wrote an article in the Open Forum Magazine to say that there seemed to be some delusional thinking going on in the Department of State on this issue. Well, it was my good fortune in terms of [corridor] reputation and our national bad fortune that the North Vietnamese offensive occurred in March. This article appeared in October. So I looked very precocious at the time even though I was just really reflecting in Open Forum Magazine what was pretty obvious to a lot of people. Of course I didn't have access to it or I couldn't print a copy of it publicly since it was a still classified secret. But some years later I finally got a hold of it by going through the Freedom of Information Act. It seems pretty good reading even to this day for talking about what was actually happening at the time and showing that what the U.S. government was saying to the Congress did not represent what was happening at the time.

Q: What it would be very interesting to do is when you get the chance to edit this transcript, why don't you insert this thing in there. Back to Woodrow Wilson. When you weren't dealing in the upper reaches of diplomacy, what courses were you taking? How did you find the school itself?

THIELMANN: Oh, when I wasn't in the upper reaches, I was down in the depths of struggling through statistics and microeconomics, something that made me feel pretty stupid. The school rather deliberately thought what students really needed there was not the kinds of things that I would be most interested in studying, history and international affairs. But they had a lot of requirements on quantitative analysis and economic theory and application, which indeed did fill some of the gaps in my own education. But a lot of this was hard stuff. I had this epiphany about half way through my economics class that one of the reasons why I wasn't understanding what was being said was because I had no calculus in either high school or college and they were presenting calculus. It was that part of the training I thought was not well crafted to appeal to non-specialists or people not interested in econometrics because it was people who were very interested in the econometrics side of it that were the ones giving the lectures for the most part. So I had a tough time in some of the courses there and a frustration that some of the things I would be most interested in studying like Richard Ullman's classes in international affairs were not available. I had a great one my second semester, but the next year he went off to the Foreign Affairs Council of New York, and he wasn't available for classes.

So I had kind of a spotty report on the quality of the teaching. Richard Falk who was one of the most well known people on international law among scholars was I thought not very good at all as a lecturer. He spoke very slowly and it probably looked great as a transcript. But it was not very riveting to listen to, and he was not particularly interested in what everyone who is a foreign affairs practitioner needs to know about international law. I took his international law course at Princeton, but I still feel there is that gap in my understanding of the basics of international law, which the Foreign Service never bothered to teach either. So I really give only a say a C grade to the quality of Princeton's instruction and how it suited my later needs. But I would give an A to the quality of the experience with the other students there. I mean, I learned a great deal from this group of very accomplished and bright graduate students, most of whom went into either domestic affairs, the World Bank or international economics. I was one of only four people of that fifty who went into graduate studies in international affairs. It was kind of a waning interest. This public affairs school for international affairs didn't seem to draw people into the Foreign Service anymore.

Q: It was also a period too when there was a real turning away from government service.

THIELMANN: That's right. That's right.

Q: So money was the place to go.

THIELMANN: That's right. That's right. You could earn a fortune and real power in something other than the foreign service. That was an exception at the time. It was sort of one of those has-been career pursuits.

Q: Well then, you got to, so we get you out in seventy-

THIELMANN: '75.

Q: Whither?

THIELMANN: Well, in '75 I had passed the foreign service exam. I actually took it twice. The first time was as a senior in college and I did not pass it. I passed the written, but did not pass the oral. It was suggested to me at the time that I should really try the consular cone. They said consular administrator would be easier, and I said, "No, I'm really interested in the political cone." He said, "Well, try again. Maybe in graduate school," and at that time I did pass, both the written and oral. So I had passed it. I guess it was winter at that time, but there was still the physical and background investigations. I was told that they were running nine months behind in background investigations. So there wouldn't be any job offer or invitation to enter foreign service when I graduated from Princeton. So I had to have a job, and it was through Princeton connections that I found out the Office of Management and Budget was hiring, for the international security division. So I got a job that actually turned out to be a very good job as a budget examiner for naval research and development, which was a four billion-dollar line item, bigger than the entire State Department budget. That allowed me even as a young budget examiner to get very good treatment visiting the naval research and development establishment and even getting some tours of operational activities like P-3 patrols over the Atlantic and carrier landings off South Carolina. So for the next two years I worked as a budget examiner and learned a great deal about the budget process and defense activities in particular. I retained my interest in the Foreign Service though. When I had initially turned down the offer, which I had got I guess a few months after entering the OMB, they certainly made clear that this might be the last chance that I would get to enter the Foreign Service. I thought I cannot in good conscience leave this job. It wouldn't be fair to the people that hired me at this point. But I certainly was interested if sometime before my eligibility expires, which I think was thirty months, I could be asked again. Of course they made no promises, but in fact they did ask me again. So after having work at OMB for two years and reached the frustrations that I think come to budget examiners who realize that the main function of OMB is to suggest budget cuts and not to necessarily suggest better ways to spend money or differing programs emphases. I also realized that, unlike some other areas of OMB, the national security division has relatively less influence because no one wants to let those green eyeshade folks affect our national security. It doesn't matter if they inspect our foreign affairs, but somehow national security is exempt. So I felt some of those frustrations and felt that I would like to enter the Foreign Service, which I then did in March of '77.

Q: We'll pick this up nexttime, but do you recall any of the questions that were asked you during the oral exams which you passed and didn't pass?

THIELMANN: Yes. I certainly remember and I think this was the one that I passed. I got a question about naming my favorite American artists and authors. This was one of the last questions I got, and I remember my mind going completely blank. I could not think of any names whatsoever. I think the only name I came up with was Jackson Pollack whose work I don't particularly even like. But it was incredible. I don't know if I came up with F. Scott Fitzgerald or whatever who I really did like at the time or not. But apparently they had already made up their minds about me before that last throw away question. It certainly left me in a funk at the end of the interview.

Q: Today is the 3rd of January, 2005, our first day of work after the new year. Greg, tell me a little about your A100 course, your basic officer course, the composition and how you perceived it.

THIELMANN: I would have to look up to remind myself about the numbers in the course. I perceived it as a group of very interesting people who were quite capable. There were a fair number of women in it. It was I think the foreign service was already trying to get over its reputation as just being a white male bastion. One of the things that I had a distinct impression of was there were certain members of the class that impressed me early on for being very capable. This was sort of in a group all of whom or nearly all of whom impressed me as being capable, but there were some who stood out. It's very interesting how well those early impressions correlated with the success some of these people have had in the foreign service. I mean, if I had been asked which one of these people is really going to go far, I would've said Alexander Vershbow, now our ambassador to Moscow, Richard Boucher, the press department spokesman; someone like Bill Woods, I'm not sure what his current position is. There are a couple in the Foreign Service. But there were others obviously who were capable who are no longer in and have gone other directions. But it was a pretty good bonding experience. The difference for me was I had been living in Washington, actually working at the Office of Management and Budget for the two previous years. In a way that left me a little bit outside the mainstream because most people were coming to Washington from elsewhere and many of them had just interrupted either their studies or their career elsewhere and they had more time together in the evening. I sort of had an established life and my own circle of friends. So in a way I wasn't able to take advantage of that unique bonding experience in the same way as later in my career I took advantage of the mid-level professional development class when I was in more or less a similar kind of boat as everyone else in the class.

Q: Greg, were you hired for a particular cone or specialty or was it general?

THIELMANN: When I entered, they were still hiring people by cone. In fact I had taken the exam twice, and passed the written both times. The first time I did not pass the oral. This was right after college or I guess during my senior year of college. I remember at the time being encouraged to try one of the other cones other than political that were a little less competitive. I had decided at that time, that no, I really wanted the kind of work that the political cone offered. So I took it again when I was in graduate school and that time did pass. I entered as a political officer. In those days the expectation from early on was you would have one consular tour, and then the rest would fall into your own cone.

Q: Did you have any particular area before they came around and assigned you? Did you have any drive towards a particular area?

THIELMANN: I would say that the area I felt pulled to most strongly was Germany partly because I had some German language and a particular interest in the country and culture and had spent a summer there. If there was anything that in my immature mind seemed logical for the Foreign Service, it was to send me to Germany or some place in Europe. Of course that's not an unusual position for entering Foreign Service officers to think they know what's good. As it happened, I think I remember the feeling that the continent where I was eventually sent, South America, interested me less than any other continent of the world. I mean, if you would have asked me to rank Europe and Asia and Africa and South America, South America would've clearly been at the bottom. It was a little bit different though when we were shown the list of jobs, which were obviously not the cream of Foreign Service offerings but something else. For someone interested in the political cone the attraction of a job that was labeled as rotational was very compelling, and Brasília was one of those jobs that offered one year political and one year consular. So I think that ended up being my second choice. My first choice was Frankfurt, Germany, and looking back now I'm very grateful for having that opportunity to get to know Brazil. I returned there later for another tour, my last foreign tour. It was a very meaningful experience. Professionally, the fact that I was, my first year in the Foreign Service the consular section chief in an embassy that had a small consular function meant that I had an opportunity to do basically all aspects of consular work except for immigrant visa processing and had the responsibility for attending the country team representing the consular section and for going to the foreign ministry frequently on consular issues. So it was a very rich kind of consular experience.

Q: Well, then you were assigned to Brazil, Brasília. You were there from nineteen-when to when?

THIELMANN: This would've been 1977 to '79. Ended up being a little short of two years because of the language requirement.

Q: What, talk about Brasília at the time, what was it like?

THIELMANN: I can make some comparisons because I served there again from 1995 to 1998. Brasília at the time even though the city had been in existence at that point I guess nearly twenty years. The city was basically built in three years, a city of a million people. When I arrived there, there was still a lot of the planned city that was unbuilt. I mean, you had an architectural design that was sort of in the shape of a bird or a plane or whatever. One of the wings had clearly not yet been filled out. Even the older wings and the superblocks as they were called still had a lot of red earth with just sort of scrub on it rather than manicured grass, that I found during my later tour. There was a much more powerful sense of isolation there than later also. Brasília being deep inland, 900 miles from the coast, a two-day drive to Rio, a day drive to Belo Horizonte, really quite a long way from any competing center and really surrounded by not quite empty savanna but very sparsely populated savanna that for the most part looked like there was no livestock, no cultivation, nothing. So added to that was the fact that the electronic age hadn't arrived. It was clearly where you get island fever and, in fact the post at the time had an isolation differential in acknowledgement of that situation. Brasília has always and continues to be a unique Brazilian city because so many of the things that one associates with other Brazilian cities don't take place there. You have much less density in terms of the population. The privileged and the wealthy want to live right in the heart of the city, and the suburbs are for poor people. Brasília was almost on the American model. The nice apartments in the city were where Brazilians, I think, instinctively wanted to be. It turned out that they were a lot of developments like American suburbs on the other side of the lake, which increasingly would attract people. There everyone could have their own swimming pool and their own yard and a relatively short drive to work, and it took on an American city kind of flavor, much more than one would associate with Brasília.

Q: I realize you were at the bottom of the feed line, but where, what, how were relations with Brazil at that time in '77 to '79?

THIELMANN: Relations were bad. I'm not sure this would be described as the low point in the relationship. But it was at least a close competitor for whatever the low point was. The ambassador was named Crimmins.

Q: John Hugh Crimmins?

THIELMANN: I was lowly enough that he was just Ambassador Crimmins to me. But my understanding was that he had nearly been PNGed shortly before I arrived. We did not have a long overlap. It was I think just a few months after my arrival that he left. But he had a very serious dustup with the Brazilian government, actually over the fate of a particular American missionary who had been sort of kidnapped by Brazilian security officials and was probably on his way to being killed. Crimmins was very persistent in asking the Brazilian authorities who first said they had no information. But eventually his persistence resulted in his release, and his persistence and some of the comments he made about the Brazilian government were not appreciated by them. This was during a period when Brazil was still under a military dictatorship.

Added to that was the fact that in 1977 with the Carter administration, there was much more of a focus on human rights and nonproliferation in U.S. policy. That was like a one-two punch to the bilateral relationship with this particular military dictatorship because Brazil had a missile program and a nuclear weapons program at the time. It had an oppressive military government albeit less so than Argentina and Chile. So, as the Brazilians were very quick to notice, Vice President Mondale's first international trip was to Germany. One of the most important items on his agenda was to talk the Germans out of selling nuclear reactor technology to the Brazilians because of our concern about how it could be used. Then with Carter's very visible pro-human rights profile, the Brazilians, I think appropriately, saw themselves as one of the targets of his policies. With those two overwhelming burdens on the bilateral relationship, I thought it was basically a good thing, an appropriate thing for the U.S. I saw Brazilian relations with the U.S. in some respects as in kind of a downward tailspin at the time I arrived and probably during much of my tour. I remember things like the newly appointed head of human rights at the State Department Pat Derian going to Brazil and seeing rolling eyes everywhere about how are we going to seat people at a meeting or at a dinner for this guest. It was like a pariah. No, it was a combination of this sort of Latin American machismo about what's a woman doing in a foreign affairs position. Then charged with the subject the Brazilians didn't want to talk about at all. To me that was kind of one of the most dramatic memories about how difficult U.S.-Brazilian relations were.

Then on the nuclear front in fact on both of these issues, I think the U.S. was on the side of history. During my second tour there it was very dramatic to see for example former President Jimmy Carter coming back to Brasília, sitting around a table with NGOs and having the Brazilians recall how some of them were in prison at the time and how important for them and their cause it was to have the American president taking this position. So we were definitely benefiting in the 1990s from the positions the U.S. had at the time. My second tour in Brazil was in one of the best possible periods of the U.S.-Brazilian relationship. So it's really going from the nadir to the peaks to look at those two tours.

Q: I'll come back to some other things. But while we're on this subject, did you find that the "chief" - I use the word in quotes because you were it of the consular section, you did sit in the country team. Did you sense almost resistance in particularly the human rights policy and all? I mean saying well, it's all very well, but we've got other things to do, and this is screwing up our way of getting this deal or that deal or something like that.

THIELMANN: I think it was early enough in the introduction or let's say raising the profile of human rights issues that I had the impression as a young officer that it was almost instinctive by career officers saying human rights is kind of unseemly to bring into conversations here. It's unpleasant. It will have immediately negative consequences, and my own feeling is that a lot of the career foreign service officers were still in a state of shock about engaging in a different way of doing business. What I would say sympathetically to them is, of course they had an acute appreciation of how a concern about human rights can very easily turn into an arrogant position of "we are better than you," we know how you should behave. This is particularly the case when policies are controlled by political types who maybe don't have a very sophisticated view of the world. I'm not necessarily putting Carter in that position, but we've certainly seen a number of others in that position. I think it didn't take the Foreign Service long - I would really date it from Carter - to see the advantages of having a human rights report and seeing the long term advantages of being perceived by populations, even if not by governments, as being on the side of human rights. So I saw a lot of evidence of resistance when I entered the Foreign Service, but within a relatively short period of time, I think even some of those veteran officers changed their own views about how a properly administered concern about human rights could work.

Q: Here you are, a brand new officer. Were you married by the way at the time?

THIELMANN: I was single and I must say that, well Brasília had a reputation at the time that if you came to Brazil single, you would leave married. If you came married, you would leave divorced. In my case it didn't quite apply. I came single and left single. But I did during the course of my two years meet my future wife who was a Peace Corps volunteer. I met her in the Miami airport, and my second year in Brasília was a period of getting to know her. So in some sense at least the beginning of the marriage occurred in Brasília. Brasília, it was a heady thing to be a single American diplomat in Brasília at that time because in the Brazilian culture, and probably we could say the Latin American culture, one had sort of a double boost to one's personal stature. If you were an American diplomat, you were representative of an extremely powerful country, and so you had that personal power. You were also presumed to be rich partly because, well, because, objectively speaking, you were much richer than the average Brazilian. There was also a little bit of misunderstanding. The Brazilians would assume that the American Foreign Service was like the Brazilian foreign service, and their foreign service really was elite and the upper crust in terms of money in the society. So there was a little bit of misunderstanding. The end result of all that was that, well, let's say it was easier to get the local women interested in the single man than might be the case in the United States if you were a Foreign Service officer. So that was a nice experience for me. I guess I can say it that way.

Q: Well, tell me about your initial experience when you came. How were you received, introduced into your first post? You alluded to this off mike.

THIELMANN: Yes. I was met by two junior officers, one whom was the head of the consular section that I was going to be in. I was going to be replacing a young political officer who was working in the area into which I would rotate. So I experienced the shock of this very different kind of environment basically in the hands of two people who seemed to understand Brasília quite well. For junior officers they seemed to have both gotten a feel for the city. Both men spoke good Portuguese. One had a Brazilian girlfriend, and both of them seemed to have good contacts. But I have to report that, before the end of my first year, both of them had been invited to leave the Foreign Service because of alleged improper use of commissary items and drug transactions with the locals. Now without commenting on the guilt or innocence here, I would just say that I thought it was really unfortunate for one of the two officers who was let's say influenced by the other to do certain things that I don't think he should've been held responsible for. The Foreign Service lost a very good political analyst in talking both of them into resignation as an alternative to prosecution.

Q: Well, was there a corruption atmosphere?

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: The Philippines have this reputation. I was wondering whether-

THIELMANN: I would really say no. I now can compare it with other posts, and I would say this embassy was from the top down an honest, ethical operation. Brazilian society certainly has plenty of corruption, but the Brazilian employees of the embassy for example were honest as far as I could determine. Even some of those who had worked closely with one of these American officers were themselves not corrupt. I know from personal experience. So there should not have been a negative reflection on the whole post. In fact, the regional security officer was basically doing a good job rooting out the corruption that did exist, which unfortunately involved some of the people that I relied on most closely. Looking back on it again I thought that the regional security officer had even given kind of the ringleader sufficient warnings that he could've reformed himself if he had been inclined to do so.

Q: Let's talk about your work first as a consular officer. What sort of things did you have to deal with?

THIELMANN: At that time Brazil had a requirement for anyone who wanted to travel to the United States had to pay for the right to do so. So there was a very large exit fee requirement, which made our job in the consular section much easier because it basically meant that a lot of the huddled masses yearning to breathe free would not be able to come up with the money that would get them in the door for a Brazilian exit visa. There was still, it was still a difficult situation, and I don't think I ever really had a flair for doing what non-immigrant visa officers need to do - to read people in terms of whether they're being sincere or not, to decipher the forms and ask the appropriate questions. I don't think I was really good at it. We did have very good nationals working there, and that made it a little easier for me. But a big part of the job was the non-immigrant visa function, and we would at the time, and I suppose it's still the case, get these reports later from the Immigration Naturalization Service.

Q: Adjustment of status.

THIELMANN: Adjusting the status of those who had sworn to you, the consular officer, that they only wanted to visit Disney World and then come back. Over time that helps one develop a more cynical attitude toward the veracity of those appearing before a visa officer. But I felt at the time completely snowed under in terms of the requirements of the job. It was an awful lot for one person to do and even more so because I didn't have the experience to draw on. A lot of times I just didn't even know what one was supposed to do or what the law required. I would have to consult with either my immediate supervisor, who happened to be the DCM of a large embassy or a consular officers in Rio, and I did that. They were very good at helping me with some of these issues. But I worked very long hours and had considerable stress and then intermixed with that of course were the occasional American citizen services cases. These included the death of the public affairs officer of a heart attack when I was there. I was the one who had to identify the body and take care of that. An American businessman died on landing in Brasília and in those days there was only one Brazilian in the whole city who could embalm. Brazil had a twenty-four hour burial requirement, which put one under a great deal of stress regarding notifying relatives in the United States to pay money quickly if they wanted to see the body of their loved one again. These occasional pressures included aiding some Americans who had been arrested on drug charges in some pretty remote parts of the consular district. Brasília at the time had this enormous consular district, which I think spanned a territory almost the size of the U.S. between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean. At that time too for a brief golden period, the U.S. pledged to ensure one month consular visits for any American in captivity to make sure that they had adequate nutrition and that kind of thing. In my case this involved some trips to pretty remote parts of the country. Handling the American citizen services and dealings with the Brazilian government on top of that relentless immigrant visa work was a lot for an inexperienced first tour officer. I guess it was character building.

Q: How were prison conditions for the Americans under arrest?

THIELMANN: They were a lot better than for arrested Brazilians. I mean, they really had separate facilities and better treatment just because they were people who could create problems for the jailers. But they weren't good conditions in terms of cleanliness or humane treatment. But at least in the few cases that I had involvement with it was much less depressing than something that would result in a threat to life, limb or health of the prisoner.

Q: How did you find the Brazilian authorities, the police authorities and all. With the military government they tend to be pretty severe. I mean, did you find that with our poor relations with the country affected any of your work at all?

THIELMANN: I think it would be fair to say yes. But it was almost like some of the people I had to deal with were either so far down in the hierarchy and so dazzled by dealing with a consular officer that people would call you colonel as sort of an honorary title. So it wasn't that I didn't get respect for my office from people like that. At higher levels where there would be more national pride resistance to being pushed around by the Americans it would be a slightly different issue. But it wasn't so bad in my area, and for those people you had regular dealings with like the head of the airport police and that kind of thing, relations were fine. I mean, it was mutually beneficial for us to get along.

Q: Was there much of an American-connected missionary community in your consular district?

THIELMANN: There was indeed, and that was one of my most severe problems at the time because some of those missionaries were part of the Wickliffe Bible Society. They were bringing literacy to some of the most remote Indians, in many from cases tribes that were just being discovered. Brazilians were very jealous and concerned about these foreigners introducing civilization, if you want to use that term, to natives of their country. The Brazilians did not want the natives to learn their own language, to learn how to read and write in their own language. They wanted them to learn Portuguese and that as the only written language. So the whole Wickliffe thrust was interpreted as being hostile by the Brazilian government. This wasn't always the case, but it became more and more so. The Wickliffe Bible translators were having a terrible time getting visas renewed, and I had a constant flow of problems like that. Aside from making complaints, I didn't feel like I was really helping much other than providing a sympathetic ear and taking the complaints to the Brazilians. It was almost like the issue was much bigger than any individuals could deal with.

Some of these missionaries would provide very valuable air services and medical care and shipments to indigenous people in Brazil, and oftentimes much more effectively than local Brazilian organizations. But even that was not something that Brazilians appreciated necessarily. They more often felt threatened by it. Then there was always fear and suspicion that somehow these missionaries were working for the CIA. Nothing could have been more ludicrous if you know the CIA and know these missionaries. The missionaries were very impressive people, very dedicated, good people, people with whom I may have shared little in terms of theology but very pleasant people.

Q: But did you find that the missionary groups - one sometimes think about American missionaries as coming sort of out of the Midwest with no feel for culture or anything else. Did you feel, and all of a sudden being in a place where culture is so important and I mean, the disturbance - were they aware of the problems of bringing these people out?

THIELMANN: I think many of them were very sophisticated actually in understanding. They knew what the problem was. They did their best not to undermine Brazilian government authority in any way. They really were an apolitical bunch for the most part. Their mission was in the spiritual realm and to allow the natives to read the Bible in a way that they would be able to appreciate it and not really concerned about lobbying in a political way for an agenda other than what the Brazilian government wanted. So the problem really was not there. In some ways though they were obviously trying to introduce a foreign value system into native culture. On the other hand, they seemed to have a great appreciation for the unique culture of the various tribes. They were also very fluent in Portuguese. So they had respect for the Brazilians' language and government functions and everything. I don't think their attitudes were part of the problem.

Q: Was the deforestation of the Amazon something that was going on and was this a concern for the embassy?

THIELMANN: It was clearly going on and, of course, continuing during my later tour there. But it didn't directly impact on my particular job. There were science attachés in the embassy who particularly during my second tour I remember as being the hosts and cultural and linguistic interpreters for a huge number of NGOs and other American organizations concerned about what was happening in the Amazon. This of course extended not just to the science attachés but to the agricultural section and the economic section and many others. I think all of us in one way or another were impacted by the foreign concerns about what was happening ecologically in Brazil, and, of course, those American reactions played back into the Brazilian paranoia about U.S. intentions. I mean, there were a lot of serious people in Brazil who thought the U.S. was just looking for an opportunity to militarily occupy the Amazon.

Q: I've heard those people who served there. It is just something beyond belief almost.

THIELMANN: From the Brazilian perspective you can understand the logic train because you would have American spokesmen including some from the government talking about the Amazon as the lungs of the planet and how U.S. and international survival was dependent on what happened in Brazil. You add that to the thrust of America defending its national interests overseas with our own troops, and you kind of put two and two together. It would even come back in funny ways to see connections. On my second tour I was talking to a Brazilian admiral during a U.S. fleet visit in Recife, I think it was, he mentioned to me a U.S. plan to invade Brazil in 1941, and I thought, oh these Brazilians ... these paranoid people are now kind of trying to reinvent history. Then shortly after that there was an article in the proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute that outlined in some detail plans to land a marine division on the northeast coast of Brazil. They were only aborted in a fairly mature phase when the Brazilian government negotiated the rights to use Natal in World War II as a jumping off point for Africa. So, if the U.S. was willing to invade Brazil in World War II, then the Brazilians figure what has changed since then.

Q: Well, one of the things, we were talking about was your impression of Brazilian society. These Brazilians have always placed great emphasis on the fact that they were a multi-racial society and all. But I would think from what I understand about Brazil, is that you would find Brasília would have very few people who could trace themselves back to African descent. I would think they would be more concentrated in the more popular cities on the coast or in São Paulo.

THIELMANN: I would say yes and no to that. The Brazilian elite, the government bureaucrats in Brasília, were, let's say, lighter skinned than maybe the average Brazilian, whatever that means. Afro-Brazilians would be found most heavily in [Bahia?] and some of the coastal areas. But there really is, in so many respects and much more than in some of the other countries of Latin America, a sort of a new Brazilian, I think they almost all have African, Indian and European blood in them. So it's just a case of different degrees. In the case of Brasília specifically so much of the work there in building the city was done by people from the northeast of Brazil who tended to be darker skinned, smaller in stature, and have more Indian blood. So in Brasília, you would see the full range of Brazilian nationalities. But Brazilian attitudes to race, I mean, are strikingly different from U.S. attitudes. It's tempting to say that Brazilians were not racist and the Americans were racist, and the Brazilians would point to things like the oddities of the single drop theory of race in the U.S. If you have a single drop of African blood, then you're an African American. But somehow it doesn't work in the other direction. If an African American has a single drop of white blood, they're African American. The Brazilians would find that very odd and particularly in relation to the sexes. But in class terms it is very much taboo. That is, a Brazilian sort of European woman or a higher class woman, it would be a complete scandal if she were accompanied by a darker skinned man or if she had an affair with a darker skinned man. Here in the traditional attitudes about fidelity are limited to women and not to men. No eyebrows are raised at all about a light skinned Brazilian man having a dark-skinned companion.

Q: I've interviewed a USIS Foreign Service officer who had a male friend from Jamaica come visit her and all of a sudden she found doors shut that had been wide open before.

THIELMANN: Yes. Yes. I have seen Brazil's particular attitude toward race described as colorism, and that certainly jives well with my own personal experience. There is a presumption that the lighter the skin, the higher the class. In Brazil like in a lot of countries, when you cross class lines, you can create problems. But having said all that, there's a wide range of behavior between races in Brazil that you just would not see in the United States. So in general I agree with the generalization that Brazil is much less racist than the United States, and Brazilians value as a national asset the mixing of bloods. That is part of the pride in Brazilian identity. We are a three race nation and proud of it.

Q: Well, what did you do in the political section in your last year there?

THIELMANN: I was special assistant to Ambassador Robert Sayre, and then I had other responsibilities that are not uncommon for junior officers, like being protocol officer and bio officer, but it was pretty low level stuff for political section work. That is I didn't really work on an important piece of political section activity. We had kind of an interesting crew of people at the time. It was a very odd position to be in in terms of being the staff assistant to the ambassador because I was in the political section, kind of around the corner from the ambassador. I had to overcome the normal difficulties with the ambassador's secretary since she perceived job overlaps in my responsibilities. The ambassador himself, Robert Sayre, I would say, had a somewhat introverted personality, and so, it took me a while to adjust to his style. At the same time it had not been made clear to me who my immediate supervisor was. I mean, who was actually going to be writing my evaluation. I remember being sort of astounded maybe six months into the tour and finding out that my immediate supervisor was actually the deputy political counselor. I mean that was complete news to me. That was obviously my fault because I was so junior and naïve and didn't know how important it was to know who your boss is when you start a job. I think the blame is probably shared. So it was, I would have to say in terms of what I learned and the quality of the professional experience, it was better as a consular officer being section chief than it was being a low man on the totem pole of the political section when my job was really divided between serving the political section and serving the ambassador.

Q: Robert Sayre has the reputation of being rather introverted. How did you find dealing with him? How did he operate?

THIELMANN: It's a little hard for me to characterize. He obviously had previous experience with Brazil and a lot of experience in the Foreign Service. So he was very self-confident in his views. I think he kept things fairly close to the vest, it wasn't very transparent to me what he was thinking. He didn't have the, let's say, the pedagogical instinct that sometimes ambassadors have for staff assistants. Let me tell you how the world works kind of thing. He would express his views, but in some ways I think it was a little bit hard to be a staff assistant because he was a little bit hard to read in terms of what he actually wanted done. My memories of this are just things like he was very upset over the way the section was arranged because someone walking into the ambassador's outer office could see him at the desk if his door was open because that was kind of an unacceptable intrusion into his privacy. I don't remember as clearly some of the really substantive issues.

Q: You mention a relationship that's often not picked up by people but a very important one. That is being the assistant and then the ambassador's secretary because the secretaries when they've risen to that position are very powerful people and often very strong-willed. Did you find that all your newly honed diplomatic skills had to be used? I assume it was a lady.

THIELMANN: Yes, it was. And yes, I think it required a great deal of diplomacy, and there were some unpleasant exchanges. I suppose it's a little bit like a second lieutenant and a grizzled sergeant working out a relationship. I think that we did work out a modus operandi in the course of the year. I didn't end up thinking that the ambassador's secretary was power hungry or anything other than this was one of those tough situations. Even the existence of a staff assistant to the ambassador is regarded by the secretary as an insult to her capabilities and her authority. Under those circumstances it's very hard to work constructively, but I think we adjusted in a way that she would see that it was useful to have me in my job and that I helped her and that she helped me.

Q: Who was the DCM?

THIELMANN: DCM was Richard-I'm drawing a blank on the name. I'll have to fill that in later.

Q: Not Johnson

THIELMANN: Yes, indeed. Richard Johnson whom I liked very much actually. He had been my supervisor in the consular section, and in some respects he filled in those gaps in personal relationship with the ambassador. He was approachable. I could relate to him very easily, and he provided a kind of mentoring in some ways. And he was sympathetic in a way that one got the feeling that he would try to help me in my career subsequently. I didn't get that feeling with Ambassador Sayre even though years later he was very friendly towards me in the State Department when I would run into him. I think in his own way he did have appreciative feelings and kind feelings toward me that just didn't come through that well.

Q: Yeah, Dick Johnson I knew because we took Serbian together.

THIELMANN: Oh you did.

Q: With his wife. I want to say Donna, but I'm not sure if that was his wife's name. But this was back in the '60s.

THIELMANN: I could probably be convinced by someone of great qualities or bad qualities. I can just remember my very positive feelings at the time. He gave me what I needed as a junior officer, and he seemed in a lot of ways to be a good role model for me.

Q: Did you get any feeling in both your jobs there that there were tensions or problems between particularly our consulates in Rio and São Paulo?

THIELMANN: Yes. I think even then, and I had a better perspective on that later, but it was a very odd situation. I don't think there are very many other countries in the world, maybe Pakistan is such a country, where you have these very large, vibrant and important cities that are subservient to a smaller and in many respects less important capital city where all the American senior officials are located. So it's hard to get the officials in the capital city to the consulates in a way they should be. There was in both my first and second tours a continuing effort to grapple with the fact that the building in Rio was not our embassy, with a lot of offices and empty space right in the heart of Rio. In comparison with the embassy which was really built to the anticipated size required in Brasília, and was compared by Henry Kissinger to a Coca Cola bottling factory, which I thought wasn't quite fair to the embassy. And then, of course, you had São Paulo as the real economic powerhouse and the capital of the most advanced Brazilian states. So there was all kinds of tension there. I was probably too lowly during the first tour to be aware of any kind of real struggles between the ambassador and the consuls general. I suspect they existed.

Q: While you were there was there any movement that you were picking up from your senior colleagues towards changing Brazil from a military government to a civilian one?

THIELMANN: The process had already started. I mean Brazil was slowly moving to a civilian government. At the time I was first there, there was, for example, a permitted opposition party in the parliament. In many ways the system was rigged to make sure that the pro-government party stayed in control. But there was a nascent true opposition element that one sees today in Brazil with that one party that was allowed. So it was sort of the beginning of a fairly vibrant Brazilian democracy in the mid '70s when I was there.

Q: Did you find in the embassy that there was any desire on the part of our people to get out to Rio all the time?

THIELMANN: I don't think that was the way it was in the early years. I mean the early years you had all these terribly reluctant cariocas, Brazilians from Rio, who were then dragged out of their very comfortable bureaucratic situations where they could spend lunch on the beach or whatever to the middle of this wild savanna of Brasília. Many of them would return frequently to Rio. By the time I was there it wasn't a factor for the Americans because we couldn't afford it. It was expensive to fly to Rio. It wasn't something that one did frequently for fun. There was still, when I was there, an opportunity to make an informal courier run which started in Rio and went up to Salvador and Recife and Belem. That was one of the things that embassy officers looked forward to - a chance to see some of those cities overnight. But, travel was not casually done in those days.

Q: Well, then in 1979 what were you looking to do and what happened to you?

THIELMANN: In '79 I was looking for a job that would be closer to my perceived career interests. I never saw myself as a Latin American political specialist and was interested really in political-military affairs that would allow me to pick up some of the things I had learned in the two-year stint in the Office of Management and Budget's national security division and also to take advantage of my own academic and other interests in military affairs. So I bid on a job in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs that was in at the time called the Office of Disarmament. I think it was originally Disarmament and Communist Affairs (DCA). They were looking for someone who would work on the arms control aspects of what was then called the gray area systems, later called theater nuclear forces or intermediate range nuclear forces, which had been deliberately left out of the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) treaty process as being something that would complicate and burden an already difficult undertaking.

So in some respects I got in on the ground floor of arms control in 1979 - right around the time when the NATO allies under U.S. leadership agreed to the so called dual track decision to pursue both the modernization of this category of weapons on the NATO side and also to pursue arms control with the Soviets that would get a grip on their new SS-20 missiles that were being deployed. So, I'm not sure how, it seemed like I got that position fairly easily, and I can no longer remember exactly how. But it suited me very well to get back in something that I thought was solidly in line with what I had in mind for my own career. It turned out to be a good position in a number of ways because there was a lot happening. I felt that I made a real contribution albeit at a lower level to how the policy was being implemented, carried out.

But it also during my first year or two provided me with one of the worst bureaucratic challenges of my entire career because this office was looking basically to create something that it really hadn't had up to that point. This was the arms control office. There was another office in political-military affairs, which I think was called International Security Policy, that felt they needed no help in this at all. They had this issue well in hand. There was another office called Systems Analysis that was also working on this issue in terms of the impact of the SS-20s and the appropriateness of various combinations of U.S. missiles that would balance them. Then there was another bureau, the European Affairs Bureau, that thought they could do this themselves quite nicely, thank you, without the Political-Military Bureau getting involved. So my mission was to insert myself into groups of people that did not want my services - to participate in something that was being led by a deputy assistant secretary (DAS) in the Political-Military Bureau. He was not my DAS. I also had to report to my DAS who was very jealously trying to insert himself in this fairly well oiled machine. So I thought it was about as bad a situation as I could imagine. Two bureaus were fighting over who would have lead in the action. Three different offices in my bureau were involved with one office very much feeling that it was in charge and feeling it didn't really need any help from the interlopers in another office in the bureau. I was feeling that I basically had two different chains of command that I would get yelled at for not serving adequately. If you add some of the personalities here, one can appreciate the problem. Jerry Kahan was the deputy assistant secretary who was in my normal chain of command. But David Gofford, who was later deputy assistant secretary in the European bureau, was the political military DAS who was basically running the show in a well-oiled machine. So and I should add here that the systems analysis person who was working on this was Richard Clarke.

Q: Oh yes.

THIELMANN: So my colleague, Ted McNamara, was the office director in the other bureau who was really the one who was more or less in charge of this. All of these folks had illustrious careers after this brief experience, but they were some very bright people, very capable people, not necessarily good team players. It was a very challenging kind of environment. The best thing about the whole experience was that my office director, Mark Palmer, later ambassador to Hungary and prior to that a speech writer for Henry Kissinger. That was actually where I had gotten to know him when I was an intern on the policy planning staff earlier on. So he was a wonderful role model in terms of someone who was pleasant, extremely competent, and had the world in perspective. There was a life outside the job. So in a lot of ways I felt I had the worst of all possible bureaucratic morasses to deal with and then one of the best of all possible office directors to have as a role model.

Q: Well, first, what was the time frame you were there?

THIELMANN: This was 1979 originally to '81, but then I extended a year and this particular situation I described changed when the administration changed, and there were different kinds of implications of the administration change, but the deputy assistant secretary changed. Then obviously, the president of the national security advisors changed. My office director changed. My new office director and immediate supervisor was Jim Dobbins who had a prominent role in a number of different policies. Then there was another officer who sort of shared the burden with me of doing the INF (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces) arms control work in his office. Richard Burke became the head of the Political-Military Affairs bureau. Robert Blackwell was one of the DAS's there and so it was certainly a way to work closely with and get to know a number of people who were very much in the news some years later. During this period of course one had this very dramatic, bureaucratic rivalry between Richard Perle in the Pentagon and Richard Burke in the State Department. One of the advantages if you want to call it that of being an action officer on INF arms control was I saw from the inside a lot of the kind of encounters that were described by Strobe Talbott in his books about the arms control developments during this era and also those encounters by the very ideological NSC staff of Ronald Reagan in the early years with General Schweitzer and Sven Kramer being the holders of the flame and people who were very interested in seeing new missiles deployed and very much less interested in seeing any kind of arms control outcome.

Q: I mean the Soviet introduction of the SS-20 was in a way we realized in retrospect sort of the last gasp of the Soviets trying to change the NATO alliance.

THIELMANN: Yes, I really agree with that. It's not even clear certainly how much the Soviet leadership realized what the SS-20s would do for them in terms of the military balance, but in a way they got sold a bill of goods. They got sold a system without being told what the political-military ramifications were. Eduard Shevardnadze later said as Soviet Foreign Minister that Afghanistan and the Soviet's build-up of SS-20s were the things that led to the disastrous fall of the Soviet Union. He would site how few people were actually involved in giving the go ahead to the SS-20s. But by doing that they introduced a system that would triple the number of warheads the Soviets had available while at the same time making much less vulnerable the missiles on which those warheads were deployed. So it really was a very significant upgrading of Soviet capabilities, and it was something that, although it's often forgotten, prompted a European demand that something be done about this to which the U.S. really responded.

Of course what Helmut Schmidt said when he gave his famous speech at the Institute for Strategic Studies in London, the west has to do something about this. What he really had in mind was arms control, and what the U.S. had in mind, or what many people had in mind, was deploying systems to counter the Soviet systems. But it was a very historic development I think, and as originally conceived it was providing leverage for good faith negotiations in the spirit of the original December 1979 dual track decision.

But, when the Reagan administration came in, they didn't like that arms control talk at all. I mean dē̃tente and disarmament were already dirty words for the Reagan administration. It was very clear that the White House and the Pentagon at the time had no interest whatsoever in pursuing the arms control track. They just wanted to get the systems deployed. It was really a very valiant effort on the part of Alexander Haig in the first months of the administration aided by Margaret Thatcher and the German government represented, at least initially by Helmut Schmidt, explaining what the realities of the European political situation were that kind of got the U.S. back on track and at least nominally kept us on both on the track of both arms control and deployment. So it was very fascinating at that point to be in the Department and see the interaction of European allies with the highly ideological Reagan administration and the role Alexander Haig played as someone who had to bring the unpleasant realities to the White House about what the real political world required.

Q: Because Haig had been NATO commander.

THIELMANN: That's right. He knew what the political realities were before he took the job.

Q: You know with this complicated intertwining of responsibilities, did this, dealing with really the probably it and Afghanistan were the two most important issues that we had to deal with at that time. But with all the, everybody trying to get a piece of the action of the State Department, I don't know if the Pentagon had a similar thing or not, but how did it work? Did you find yourself, I mean were just trying to make your marks for your office or were you or anybody able to get things done?

THIELMANN: Well, in retrospect and one does benefit from looking back on it years later, I think what I did was part of the enormous service provided by the State Department to save us from ourselves here and retain the general structure of that dual track approach - to keep alive the arms control track at a time when the new leadership was completely cynical about and had no interest at all in getting any kind of arms control outcome because they saw that as something that could only hurt the U.S. by preventing any U.S. missile deployments and ending up resulting in a legitimation of an imbalance in military forces. That's the benign spin on it. So by helping to keep that structure alive and to keep the dialogue open with the Europeans, I think we contributed to what eventually was a good outcome, which was the elimination of this entire category of weapons. It's one of the great ironies of course that this is exactly what Richard Perle in the Pentagon were afraid of in entering into this process. Even ironically it was not the ideal outcome in the thinking of those, at least in the U.S., who came up with the dual track decision. What the U.S. was trying to do was to allow it to move away from all these battle field nuclear weapons, which if they were ever used, would help annihilate the country that we were trying to defend and to build up or to restore a balance in the longer range systems that at least could threaten the Soviet Union rather than what some might call the captive nations of Eastern Europe.

I think the ideal outcome that was envisioned in the late '70s was that there would not be an elimination of the longer-range systems. You would have a restoration of balance in these long-range systems at a lower level than there would otherwise be, but you would then prepare the way for the elimination of the battlefield systems that made no sense for us. The fact that you ended up kind of eliminating all the longer range systems and keeping the battle field systems was logically kind of inconsistent and second best. But, by providing such an incredible breakthrough with the Soviets, it did eventually lead to an outcome that I think everyone's grateful for today.

So my role in all that was much more a little piece of the implementation rather than the formulation of what our policy should be. But remembering back on that period, which was very intensive, and involved very long hours, it was preparing talking points and other things for meetings either for the Europeans or in the U.S. interagency setting which seemed at the time always to be either just barely treading water or else losing more and more power to the Pentagon - letting the Pentagon successfully manipulate the process to block the kind of things that should have been happening. So it seemed at the time that I was just participating in a massive bureaucratic defeat like a long retreat burning the villages behind you.

Q: Well, was Richard Perle seen as sort of the villain more than in a way than the Soviets?

THIELMANN: Yes, right. He was the evil genius who I saw as completely cynical, completely duplicitous, and whatever he said the reason for his position was at a meeting was not necessarily the real reason. Of course he was the author of the zero solution, and he specifically proposed that as the one thing he knew the Soviets would never accept so that he could sabotage the arms control process.

Q: This is complete elimination of everything.

THIELMANN: Right, that's right. He's the one who had successfully sent the negotiators to Geneva no fall back position because fallback positions might lead to an agreement. He was the one who successfully convinced Washington to reject the dual track that Paul Nitze negotiated with Kvitsinsky in that famous walk in the woods. He was the one who blocked so many other sort of hopeful approaches between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. And he outmaneuvered Richard Byrd. He was by far the most successful. Even though he reported to Freddy Clay at the Pentagon, he was clearly the most powerful person in the Pentagon even including Weinberger on charting the course of INF policy.

Q: Did you get any feel - granted you're way down - for how the Soviets operated? I mean, were some of the same things going on with the Soviet side?

THIELMANN: Yes, they, their Richard Perle equivalents, and those who were hostile to any kind of agreement basically found each other - Perle and the Soviet hard-liners. For example Kvitsinsky was obviously someone with whom one could make a deal as Nitze did. But the U.S. basically sabotaged the dual track decision outcome before the Soviets had a chance to. I'm convinced the Soviets would've also sabotaged it. That is hard-liners in Moscow would've rejected what Kvitsinsky negotiated. It's just unfortunately that, because we did it first, we didn't get the benefits that would've accrued to for showing our bona fide's of actually trying to get a solution and with a finger pointing toward the Soviets as the ones who were preventing a solution.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Germans, the French, the British in this?

THIELMANN: Well, I certainly did partly, of course, buttressed by experience in the subsequent years as a political-military officer in Bonn, but even during that job in the Department you would see a lot of interactions at NATO meetings with the various players. There were very impressive players that had an influence much disproportionate to their nation's strength. There was a Norwegian who has since died, but he was - I'm forgetting his last name. He was very impressive. He was someone who would be negotiating the resolutions and communiqués in English, and he was extremely astute. He saw through devious efforts of the U.S. to sidetrack arms control and so forth. Yergin Holtz I think was his name. So to witness how effective he was in these meetings basically boxing above his weight, to see what I regard as very effective diplomats like Fred Ruth, R-U-T-H, of Germany, the disarmament commissioner in the German foreign office who was extremely persistent, tried every trick in the book, just kept gnawing at us on going back to the agreement 1979 and the language used and the philosophy at a time when without that kind of intense lobbying one might have seen Alexander Haig lose to the hawks and kind of throw the whole thing out. Saw a lot of that, and then of course the British who had their own particular national interest to uphold and, while sympathetic - and Thatcher was clearly sympathetic to the Reagan agenda - had no interest in abandoning arms control as a talking point and as an objective. So she would deliver stern lectures to Reagan in private, and of course the British diplomats would reflect her point of view. So we had, we got maximum benefit I would argue, out of the special relationship and having the British tell it like it was to U.S. officials who might not have been inclined to listen to those French and German naysayers.

Q: What was the role of the NSC (National Security Council) during this period?

THIELMANN: Well, they had an important role just because they were the NSC and they were allied to the Weinberger-Richard Perle point of view. They were able to reinforce that combination of ignorance and ideological predisposition that Ronald Reagan represented. But looking back I don't think that they were that effective. They were not brilliant like Richard Perle was. Schneider was a strange sort of disheveled former military officer who had been famous in Germany for telling his troops to send home their wives and families because there was going to be a nuclear war in Europe. He really didn't have much of a grip on reality, and he was extremely disheveled. His papers were always confused. He was someone who would lean across the table early on in the Reagan administration and quote from the Republican party platform in terms of saying what should be done and would accuse David Gofford, then a deputy assistant secretary in the European bureau, of being a McGovernite arms controller. That's the level of sophistication you had represented by the NSC. Sven Kramer, who was really sort of the other NSC member who played a key role in INF, really saw this as sort of a moral crusade in a way and would find like-minded allies or seek like-minded allies in Europe who kind of understood what the stakes were and wanted to go the right way. Those people were mostly outside what I would call the mainstream in the foreign ministries and defense ministries of these various countries. So I don't think the NSC was particularly effective at the time.

Q: Did you get any feel for Alexander Haig? He right from the beginning sort of alienated a lot of the political operators in the Reagan administration in the White House, not necessarily on foreign affairs, but he was, they felt he wasn't part of the team and he was trying to grab too much power.

THIELMANN: That was exactly what my memory was at the time. So in a sense he wasn't that politically effective, and it's very hard not to compare Colin Powell with Alexander Haig. I mean, there's so many parallels in terms of having a secretary of state who is very savvy in terms of military affairs - who because of his background understands very well the importance of the bilateral and multi-lateral relationships that underlie the issue of the day and who in both cases was never really considered part of the team. I mean those are all very strong parallels. The difference of course is in the temperament and personality. I mean Alexander Haig made problems for himself because of his personality that Colin Powell, who was much smoother, did not make. But in the end they both ended up as losing on a lot of issues and ultimately, let's say, having a shorter tenure than they might have wanted under other circumstances.

Q: When we're in during this time you were doing this, '79 to '82, I take it there was no feeling that the Soviet Union was undergoing a profound change, I mean, that it was, well, I mean it was losing its steam and weakening. But that hadn't happened, had it?

THIELMANN: No, I don't remember encountering that kind of analysis at all during that period of time. I do remember when I was doing Russian area studies-this would be in the beginning of 1987-encountering in the literature a country that was really in some respects falling apart. I mean no one was predicting collapse of the empire, but there was much more of a focus on things coming apart at the seams. It wasn't like that at all in the late '70s to my memory, and in the early '80s. It was "the Soviets are ten feet tall." They were just increasing their capabilities in leaps and bounds, and, if the U.S. didn't do something drastic, we would be rolled over. I mean I thought that the Reagan administration was itself totally irresponsible for exaggerating Soviet capabilities. But I think even those among us who felt the administration was being totally irresponsible in exaggerating Soviet strength were not perceiving the real threats to the Soviet empire that we saw a decade later.

Q: Well, this is probably a good place to stop. But Greg, in '82 you left to go where?

THIELMANN: In '82 I got a job as one member of a three-person political-military unit in the U.S. embassy in Bonn. That put me then in a role that involved even more the implementation of the INF policies than I had been involved in at the Department in the country that was most important to the INF's successful implementation at the most important time, the year of the missile in Europe. I felt really privileged by fate to be in what I remember as probably the most exciting and dramatic role I had in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you have a child at this period? Had you married by then?

THIELMANN: I did not have a child yet. I was married then.

Q: I was just going to say you could name the child SS-20 for being so influential in your career, really.

THIELMANN: That's right. Yes.

Q: Today is the 26th of January, 2005. Greg, you were in Bonn from when until when?

THIELMANN: I was in Bonn from September 1982 to I think July of 1985. I remember very well the day that I arrived in Germany because it was September 17th the day when there was a parliamentary confidence vote in the German parliament that resulted in the fall of Helmut Schmidt's government. This was when the Free Democrats and Hans-Dietrich Genscher pulled out of the Social Democratic-Free Democratic coalition. This left the SPD (Social Democratic Party) with a minority, requiring or allowing a new realignment that would remove Helmut Schmidt as chancellor. Since Schmidt had been chancellor for quite a while and a very impressive and successful chancellor, this was a very big day and the very day I arrived. This allowed me to say later that I brought down the Helmut Schmidt government.

Q: Was there any residual resentment, suspicion on the part of the Schmidt government after Carter pulled the rug from under him over the neutron bomb episode? He had made Schmidt get way out in front of him and then cut him off at the knees by changing his mind. I would've thought that that Schmidt's SPD would have been very suspicious about anything the Americans might want the Germans to do. I mean, was that around or not?

THIELMANN: Yes, I know it was very much in the air, and Schmidt was very bitter about the whole handling of the neutron bomb. I think that convinced Schmidt that Jimmy Carter was not a competent manager of national security issues. It seems to me that the irony is that in many ways Schmidt and Carter should've been close allies because I think that their sophisticated understanding of nuclear doctrine and the exigencies of the western alliance security situation really overlapped quite well. I think it was much more of a problem of personality and not very competent management on the part of the U.S. that really embittered Schmidt. But Schmidt had a lot of his own problems. He was a pragmatist, a pro-defense Social Democrat at a time when the party was leaning pretty far left. A lot of anti-American sentiment and a lot of leftover negative feelings that came out of the whole Vietnam era, were very much in the minds of the rising SDP leadership. So Schmidt himself, in the best of circumstances, had a very difficult time managing the German security position. I think he felt that the American leadership made that all the more difficult. That was the background of the neutron bomb issue.

The other little twist is Schmidt of all the Europeans was the one who was most instrumental in the NATO missile deployment decision because Schmidt complained at a very conspicuous and well publicized International Institute of Strategic Studies conference in London that the SALT-2 treaty, the latest strategic arms agreement with the Soviet Union, had not adequately addressed Soviet nuclear systems that threatened Europe. Foremost among them were what we later called the INF category missiles, SS4, SS5 and SS20 as well as the backfire medium range bomber. Those were going to be addressed in SALT-3. They were considered gray area systems. But Schmidt argued that this was a flaw of the SALT-2 treaty and that it needed to be addressed. Now this was constantly quoted in the west to justify missile deployments, but Schmidt would've much preferred that the systems be addressed by arms control and by an agreement for the U.S. not to deploy and for the Soviets to get rid of their systems, which is ultimately what happened. But Schmidt spent a lot of time trying to explain what he meant in registering that initial complaint about the need to do something about the SS20 missile modernization on the other side of the Cold War curtain.

Q: Okay, Greg, just to set the stage, when you arrived, was there the feeling the Social Democrats were out and the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) back in? So people were rubbing their hands and saying, okay, now we can get on to more conservative government and to making a strong response to the Soviets. Was there a feeling that things had changed for the better or not?

THIELMANN: There was certainly the feeling in Washington that Helmut Kohl, the leader of the Christian Democrats, could lead a party that was more naturally inclined to support the United States, more conservative on defense issues and that would make the task of the U.S. easier. The problem, which the Reagan administration encountered was that it had little feeling for and less sympathy for European concerns. The Reagan administration found out that Kohl genuinely believed in a dual track decision and worked hard on the arms control part of it almost as much as Helmut Schmidt did. So Germany became the leader of European pressure on the U.S. to negotiate seriously on the arms control track. This was dealing with the Reagan administration whose most influential members like Richard Perle, assistant secretary of defense, and I knew this from inside, wanted to sabotage any hopes of an agreement. He wanted to give the world the impression the U.S. was seeking arms control but to ensure that it never happened. Ronald Reagan never understood the issues even at a superficial level. So he was hopelessly out of it and had to be lectured by his good friend Margaret Thatcher to avoid his agreeing to give up all nuclear weapons later at Reykjavik.

Q: Okay, you get there in September '82. Could you talk about your job and what were the issues? Who was the ambassador and what was the set up of the area you were working in? Then we'll talk about the issues.

THIELMANN: The ambassador was Arthur Burns who had been chairman of the Federal Reserve. He was a very distinguished American, a sort of a non-career diplomat and one of the best arguments for political appointees. Anyone could point to someone like Arthur Burns. He was someone who actually had been a professor of young Helmut Schmidt, helping teach Schmidt economics, which was clearly one of Schmidt's strong suits. So Burns had very deep respect from the Germans even though there was a very wide-spread disdain for President Reagan to whom Burns obviously reported. Burns set a high standard I think in the embassy for a deep approach to issues. He would really conduct seminars in the embassy with foreign service officers briefing him on topics, not always directly related to the implementation of a foreign policy but to issues at a deep and substantive level. So that was an intellectually stimulating atmosphere. It was a little bit different as regards the security function because Burns kept admitting to my bosses that he really didn't know much about this at all. He would sort of trust us in the management of these issues, which contrasted greatly with my poor colleagues on the economic side where Burns knew everything.

Q: I talked to somebody who was I think an economic counselor at one point to Burns and he said, "How can I do this? I mean here is the top economist in the United States, and I am supposed to be handling the economics and be his support in this field." I don't envy him. We had it much easier.

THIELMANN: So we didn't want to let the ambassador down on the security issues. But in many ways we had quite a bit of leeway in carrying out our instructions from Washington in the best way that we could see. The political section, I might just say at that time as I look back on my career, was really top notch. It was full of people who had served previously in Germany; sometimes German experts in the State Department pejoratively called the German Club, the German Mafia. I didn't really see it in a pejorative way. I think the great strength of the Department, was they had a whole stable of foreign service officers with experience who would've excelled in any area of the world. That's really the way I would characterize the political section at the time. You had a couple of people who were Berlin specialists, all the arcana of that odd, unique status of the city of West Berlin. They would be steeped in that. You had a lawyer who worked that issue. Then we had obviously the external section, the internal section as embassies usually have and a group of people who were successful afterwards too, like the political counselor who later became our ambassador to East Germany, Dick Barkley. So it was I thought a very strong section and I felt privileged also to be the junior of the three political-military officers. One was a civilian I the office of secretary of defense, and then there was a more senior veteran foreign service officer.

Q: Who was that?

THIELMANN: Root Felts was my immediate supervisor. Root had had a lot of experience both military and in Germany. So he was a very good mentor for me as a young officer. He knew a lot about these issues but less about the practical implementation.

Q: His name was what, Root?

THIELMANN: H. Root Felts.

Q: Root, R-O

THIELMANN: R-O-O-T. One of the little humorous side notes to this time in the office was that Root had a secretary named Ruth, R-U-T-H. One of his most important interlocutors in the German government was the commissioner for disarmament in the foreign office named Frederick Ruth. So it was not infrequent that you would hear in our office Ruth saying to Root that Ruth was on the phone. So there was sort of a three-way Ruth-Root situation. Americans would pronounce Ruth's name Ruth because R-U-T-H. Anyway that was the general setting of the political section and the political military unit. It was an extremely intense time since there was a widespread perception, I think a correct one, whether or not this dual track decision would ever be implemented was going to be determined by what happened in Germany. So there was great anxiety in Washington and great attention to the cables that we would send out commenting on what was happening there, and the question in the back of everyone's mind was always, "will the Germans hold this or not."

Q: I mean, the dual track being the-

THIELMANN: The 1979 decision, but for both arms control and commitment to deployment.

Q: How, when you got there, how did each stand? Was anything happening on either end?

THIELMANN: At that point nothing much was happening on the arms control front because frankly both sides were basically posturing for the public. The Soviets were saying that they would consider freezing or decreasing the number of deployments as long as the U.S. would promise not to deploy anything. So in other words they were offering to freeze the imbalance. The U.S. had a proposal, the zero-zero solution that basically said neither side should have any weapons in this category, which ironically is ultimately what happened. The irony is that I know from inside conversations that the purpose of this position on the part of the U.S. was to ensure that there would be no agreement because the perception was that the Soviets would never accept freezing systems when they already had hundreds of them and we didn't have any - not freezing but agreeing to eliminate all their systems without any U.S. systems to be used as leverage. In fact that judgment was correct in that we had to go through all of these tense years. The Soviets really only started negotiating seriously once the first cruise missiles were being deployed to the five countries where they were being stationed and the first Pershing ballistic missiles were being deployed.

Q: Also at that time the Soviets really didn't have much leadership did they?

THIELMANN: That's right. They had the kind of leaders that needed to be propped up from behind when they went to the polls and everything. I'm not remembering right now when Brezhnev died, but they had at least three in succession that were seriously health challenged.

Q: Andropov and then Chernenko was it? Anyway, you had the three before Gorbachev, and then Gorbachev had to work his way in. I mean he didn't immediately jump in with full power.

THIELMANN: That's right. That's right. He was immediately misread by the CIA and Soviet specialists. That gets to something later in my career. I remember hearing from all of the learned treatises on Gorbachev. "There is nothing new in Gorbachev except maybe he's a little bit smarter than a dedicated Communist who's Marxist-Leninist in every way. Don't expect any shifts from the Soviet Union."

Q: What piece of the pie did you have in your office?

THIELMANN: I would tend to work more on the arms control agreement side of it. A big part of the political military function in Germany was managing those issues arising out of the fact that there were 200,000 American soldiers stationed in Germany. Any time that happens you have elaborate status of forces agreements and all kinds of interface between the American military and the German military that would be in many cases managed or at least would attempt to be influenced by the embassy seeing it as a very important piece of the foreign policy picture. So that was handled much more by my other two colleagues in the unit. I was supposed to be the expert on all the ins and outs of the U.S. arms control position and our dialogue with the Germans about all those large and small issues that came up during negotiations. When for example Paul Nitze would come back from his negotiations in Geneva with the Soviets and brief the German government, he would do that religiously and was always treated like visiting royalty when he came. I was sort of the default control officer for his visits, the one the embassy assigned to take care of Nitze. I'd take notes for him, and there was an unusual combination of things that made the Germans very solicitous and respectful of Paul Nitze. One was that Nitze had a background in German affairs and had spent earlier in his career significant amounts of time in Germany. He could understand some German for example, and he was respected for his intellect even though the Germans would've recognized him as hard liner in the Reagan administration. There were hard-liners, and then there were the nutcases. It always seemed to be a battle between those two sections.

Q: You would put Richard Perle and company in the nutcases.

THIELMANN: Well, Richard Perle was too smart to be a nutcase. I would just say that Perle was much more cynical than Nitze was and that Perle was completely untrustworthy in what he said. One could not believe him when he made an argument. Nitze was much more sincere in his orientation. The nutcases were more like General Schneider who was an advisor on the NSC and who, when he earlier had been in the field in Germany, had the habit of telling the troops to send their wives and children home because there was going to be nuclear war in Germany and they should get ready for it and who would in a State Department meeting that I attended for example lean across the table and tell the Deputy Secretary of State Dave Gofford that he was a McGovernite arms controller and start reading from the Republican Party platform in making arguments about which details of the U.S. policy should be formulated. So that's kind of what I'm derisively terming the lunatic fringe. Since there was always a battle for the rather vacant mind of Ronald Reagan on these issue one never knew exactly which part of this spectrum of opinion would come up. Even though Nitze was quite elderly, the Germans were very reassured that someone of Nitze's stature and intellectual capability and pragmatism was in a powerful position. So they did everything they could to strengthen Nitze's position, and, of course, we in the embassy would basically report on this situation which reminded Washington of what a great asset the U.S. had with Nitze in trying to preserve good U.S. German relations.

Q: Well, I'm sure there was a split in Germany over what we were trying to do particularly on introducing the Pershings and the Cruise missiles. How did that play out in the German government, people you were dealing with?

THIELMANN: Well, one of the concerns we had throughout this entire period was that the opinion polls showed that the majority of Germans were dead against any missile deployments in Germany. I mean this is the NIMBY syndrome, not in my back yard. One of the effective slogans I think was along the lines of, "it's better to be red than to have the missile deployment implemented." There was a very real fear that the end of the world was nigh that there was a real chance there would be a nuclear exchange and we would be very susceptible to the banishing of the nuclear sword by the Soviets and the threats they would make. So you had millions of Germans on the street, a kind of historic linking of hands across many miles of German countryside. It was in this environment that there were so many doubts about whether or not the German government would hold because it was obviously politically damaging for the government to persevere in supporting the dual track decision. So a lot of our conversation with the German government was on the various elements of our policies, our statements, our deployments which would make it harder for them to sustain the dual track decision to which they were committed. That involved all kinds of things like the fear we had that one of these demonstrators would break through a security line somewhere, approach a live nuclear weapon, and get shot by some young American soldier. I know this is something that really haunted Ambassador Burns throughout that period. We had during that time a U.S. Pershing-I missile that caught fire and was snaking its way through a German village. There was a lot of attention about the effects of a nuclear warhead being burned up and to what extent there would be radioactive contamination in the area. Those were the kind of issues that we spent a lot of time with.

I had really a couple of missions. My main focus was dealing with people in the German defense ministry and the German foreign office where, to whom I would represent U.S. policies and lobby them in effect to cooperate with our version of the implementation of our policies. But an equally important part of our job, and I would say probably the most important part of our job, was to make Washington sensitive to how the Germans looked at these issues and where the opportunities were and where the perils were in carrying out policies the way we did. This was also the period when Ronald Reagan visited Germany and visited the Bitburg cemetery that had the graves of SS soldiers. I can talk a little bit like that if-now-

Q: Yes.

THIELMANN: This visit I think brought a lot of insensitivity on both sides of the Atlantic about the way issues would be perceived on the other side. When the team came to prepare for Ronald Reagan's visit, it included Mike Deaver and several other members of the White House staff. My memory at the time was that they were more concerned about using their diplomatic passports to get a reduction on BMWs in Munich than they were about some of the substantive aspects of the issue. That might not be fair, and it was obviously not my little piece of it, but it is true that when Deaver visited Bitburg cemetery, it was snowing and the weather was unpleasant and he didn't want to get out of his car. Well, you can't really read those tombstones and see that they're SS members when you don't take a stroll through the cemetery.

Q: Well, I was interviewing just a couple of days ago Tom Johnson who was the USIA officer in Frankfurt who went out to Bitburg and asked the curator, whoever was the manager of the place if there were any problems here. He said, no. I think the ranking SS member who was buried there was a lieutenant, and they were mostly boys and they were drafted into the Waffen-SS. I mean it was essentially a made up issue.

THIELMANN: Right. Right.

Q: I think these, they were mostly people who had been bombed during the Ardennes offensive in Bitburg, a lot of civilians were there.

THIELMANN: I don't want to suggest that the issue was fairly represented, but rather that there was not sufficient sensitivity to the way camera images would play it up. There are other instances of German insensitivity. For example the chancellor wanted to as a gesture of respect to have a ceremony which would involve torchlight parades of German soldiers with shiny helmets and beating on the bong of a beer barrel and doing a lot of sort of German marching songs that would've been a nice supplement to the SS cemetery visit I'm sure.

Q: Anybody in that era thinking about Hitler, during the Hitler regime the troops used to march in torchlight parades in Nuremberg and all that.

THIELMANN: Yes, the Nazi film makers loved this kind of stuff. Kohl's deaf ear to the way that that would go over in the U.S. was something that we finally overcame. It was really my boss, Phelps, who can take credit for that event not happening. But another thing that interfered with the design of the visit that would've been the most meaningful on the American side was for example a visit to a concentration camp. I think it had been liberated by British forces. There were other camps that had been liberated by American forces, in fact most of them were. If I remember correctly, we highlighted a camp that had both the American Army liberating it and a large number of inmates who were German political prisoners as something that would perfectly address the themes that the Germans were victims of the Nazi dictatorship and not just the Jews of Europe. Of course it would emphasize the U.S. role in bringing that terrible dictatorship to an end. Well, there were internal German political reasons having to do with who was the minister of this German state and that German state. That wouldn't wash, but again there was sort of a conspiracy on both sides to prevent this visit from having the right kind of symbolism. It was so important not to make things worse since Reagan's image was so negative. We were trying to do everything we could to dampen down that perception on the part of the Europeans of Reagan the cowboy. So it was a bit of an ill-starred visit.

Q: I appreciate your comment. Tom Johnson had the feeling, again he was a USIA officer and looking at it from a public relations perspective, was saying that the Germans respected this visit because despite the pressure Reagan kept his word and went there as opposed to the feeling about Jimmy Carter and all that. So that this had in a way came out positive on the German side. I don't know if this holds water in your feelings or not.

THIELMANN: I think there were Germans who respected the fact that he came. I would hesitate to say that we benefited or got a big bounce in our relations from this visit. I don't remember having that impression. I'm confused about whether or not Reagan's "tear down this wall" speech in Berlin was on that visit.

Q: I think it came later.

THIELMANN: I think it did. Later on too with the way that the negotiations actually proceeded. Even though I would say that Gorbachev gets most of the credit for the success of the INF negotiations, Reagan being a party to that and Reagan doing things like going to the Berlin Wall and saying "tear down this wall" helped significantly to amend some of the more negative images of Reagan.

Q: Again put a time context Kohl and Mitterrand not long before had gone to Verdun and stood, bowed their heads, holding hands. I think both their fathers had fought at Verdun. This was really sort of the, almost the leitmotif that brought France and Germany together again.

THIELMANN: Yes, I would say that an awful lot of things brought the two countries together including the very successful, widespread and visionary exchange programs in the 1950s. But the distance traveled from that historic enmity between France and Germany and in the wake of this terribly bloody war was enormous. I too remember that meeting and the photograph of them holding their hands as being really sort of transcendental in cementing the image of a France and Germany that had common interests and had not forgotten the past but put the past behind them. It had the same power I think as on the other side, bowing in Poland to sort of atone for the sins of the Germans during the war. Those images were almost iconic in their power. Kohl, who had a number of problems that history will not look on lightly, was an historian and did have a very deep sense of history and a sense of the importance of Germany transcending some of the things that were deeply embedded in its history, anti-Semitism and animosity toward France.

Q: What was the feeling that you were getting at this time when you were in Bonn about Soviet intentions. I mean was there a feeling that the Soviets were on the move, I mean they had already gone in late '79 into Afghanistan and all. Were we concerned that something might happen at that time?

THIELMANN: It's hard to remember exactly what the feeling was, but I think I simultaneously had two feelings at the time. I don't know how widely to generalize it, but one was that the U.S. leadership was exaggerating Soviet strength. We painted the Soviets ten-feet tall in every respect, and I judge the Reagan administration extremely irresponsible in saying things about the military balance which just were not true. Even cutting through all of the hyperbole and exaggeration, the fact was there were twenty-two Soviet divisions in East Germany and that we knew enough about Soviet war plans and intentions to know that their game plan was not to sit and hold ground, which is basically what ours was but rather to move through Germany quickly to the English Channel. So the fact that that enormous preponderance of numbers on the other side of the German-Czech border was always sort of looming out there as a reality which belied a lot of the Soviet claims that their intentions were peaceful. If they really wanted to defend Eastern Europe, their numbers and deployments would've been different. That was I think our feeling at the time and still the feeling today. That having been said I don't think that those of us at the time thought that the Soviets were tempted to attack Western Europe. I mean that's the whole purpose of having strong NATO defenses so they wouldn't be tempted. I think our concern was that you didn't want to do things to create temptation. You didn't want to do things that would create such a huge imbalance that there would be intimidation on the part of the west or an inclination to do whatever the Soviets demanded. That was what we were trying to prevent.

Q: Well, was one of the nightmare scenarios was that somehow the West Germans might come up with a willingness to neutralize Germany in order to reunite and all. Was that around as a thought or at that time?

THIELMANN: I don't think people were seriously worried about it as something that was on the horizon as an imminent danger, a clear and present threat or anything. What I think, what I think was out there was the feeling that if one started down a certain road then there would always be the temptation for the Germans to reunite at the expense of what reuniting under some circumstances would actually mean. But I think that really any kind of high anxiety about that was really put to bed years earlier. I think most of the sober American analysts of Germany believed that there was a strong majority in Germany that felt that rapprochement with East Germany was necessary and desirable. But it had to be done carefully and with regard to preserving the kind of system that West Germany had developed so successfully.

Q: How did you find your German counterparts? Were you working as a team or was it difficult to work with them? I'm talking about both in the foreign ministry and the ministry of defense.

THIELMANN: In some ways it was mostly fun to work with the German defense ministry. I was left with a very high impression of the caliber of the German officers, and most of our counterparts in the arms control directorate and the defense ministry and the director that dealt with the U.S. were very impressive officers. They were knowledgeable about the United States. Many spoke excellent English. They were very politically savvy. I would have to say more politically savvy than the average Pentagon officer. So they had a degree of sophistication that made it easy as a foreign service officer and a diplomat to talk about the nuances of foreign policy, and they were very plugged into the psychology of the German people as well. They had a more rigorous program in the Bundeswehr to, let's say, be well attuned to the way average Germans were looking at issues, and to some extent it was a reflection of the fact that they still had the draft, still do. So they had that big input. They had to deal with the average Germans because they were being received by the German military all the time. They were composing large numbers of the Bundeswehr. So there was great sensitivity to public relations and that kind of thing. So that was very positive, but I also had a lot of respect for my foreign office counterparts and developed some close friendships with some of those with whom I had contact. One of my principal contacts at the foreign office during those years was a special assistant to German Foreign Minister Genscher. His name was Wolfgang Ischinger he is now the German ambassador to Washington. It was at the time a very comfortable relationship.

Q: From our perspective, from the embassy's perspective, how did we view the Kohl-Genscher relationship, and, particularly in your field, was there a distance between the two?

THIELMANN: I think, if "we" here means we the Americans who worked on these issues, there was not much respect for Genscher. He was seen as a very slimy kind of politician, incredibly political in every sense of the word, and I think my own personal feelings were out of the mainstream. I was very impressed by Genscher. I hope that doesn't reflect on me being slimy, but I saw, first of all I mean now looking back on Genscher at an incredibly long range. I mean he was the dean of foreign ministers in the West. He had many years of controlling German foreign policy. He was the spokesman for German foreign policy in an SDP/FDP government, Social Democrats and Free Democrats, and he was the foreign policy spokesman in the Christian Democratic/Free Democratic government even though his party sort of hovered around five to ten percent of the vote. I mean that's an incredible political achievement. But aside from his being politically astute as a practitioner of foreign affairs, I have to admit that Genscher in many ways to me is a model of the way countries should deal with neighboring countries that are hostile to them. Genscher would deal with Soviet provocations and sort of outrageous policies and threats in a very consistent fashion. I would describe it as firm, and he offered criticism more in sorrow than in anger. He dealt with the Soviets as one would deal with a slightly unbalanced uncle. To me that was much more productive over time than the U.S. tendency to get in a snit and basically mimic sort of outrageous Soviet insults and everything with our own. That's a caricature, but I think I'm trying to get at some differences in technique here between Genscher - and it wasn't just Genscher - and the Americans. It was Genscher and some of the other Germans on the scene as well. But the Germans because of their very vulnerable position in Europe and the fact that they had all these countries who were basically under control of the Soviets had a much more nuanced policy and one in which they would think twice about sort of egregious insults to the Soviet Union.

Q: Was there a view that when Genscher talked Cold War he was talking for Kohl or was there a feeling about Genscher saying this, but maybe we ought to get to Kohl or was that an issue?

THIELMANN: I think the U.S. sought to use Kohl against Genscher or appeal to Kohl to keep Genscher under control as it were. But I don't think we were good enough to really find fissures and fault lines that we could do that very well. Genscher was way ahead of us in making sure that his back was covered with Kohl and that he was working as a part of the coalition government. I think Kohl appreciated what Genscher brought to the government and would give him the handling of foreign policy issues. That's not to deny that I'm sure there was a lot hard bargaining and maneuvering between Kohl and his foreign minister. But I would have to say that I think they worked fairly well together. It wasn't like, well, let's say Colin Powell and George W. Bush. I mean there was one German government I think and not two.

Q: I realize you were pretty low on the feeding chain still in the embassy, but how did you and the embassy, when you were working with the Germans on this very important issue, deal with the fact that you thought that the president didn't have a clue of what was going on in regard to this particular issue? It's kind of hard to evoke the president's name if you're kind of making reservations all the time.

THIELMANN: Yes. This really gets at I think a recurrent theme in my own career, and I suspect many other foreign service officers' careers, of trying to decide how to represent policies of someone whose understanding you don't respect. There are at least two different poles of thinking on this. One, is that the you have to make sure that you are understood all the time to be the spokesman for a government whoever the president is and that you tow the line on every single policy nuance and twist so that there won't be any misunderstanding. When they hear you, they're hearing the spokesman of the United States and of its president. I lean a little bit toward the other pole which is to say that one of the most important qualities in the diplomatic relationship is credibility, and, if one aligns oneself so closely to a president that he has credibility problems, one just sacrifices one's own personal credibility without being persuasive. To be merely regarded as a shell raises the question about well, why don't you just fax me your talking points? I don't really need to see you in person. But I think the real value of the diplomat is to help explain what seems inexplicable and around the margins to make bad policies seem less bad than perhaps they really are. That I tried to do. In some sense I guess I tried to disguise what I thought the reality was with the Reagan administration, which was a brightly lit house with nobody home and some chaos and real questions about who was in charge as the various factions battled it out. So in a way I was presenting a policy that was more coherent and more logical than maybe the reality was. That was, I thought, one of the services I could perform.

Q: Well, you did have a policy that made sense.

THIELMANN: That's right and on the dual track decision in many ways I felt that I was trying to carry out the policy that had been agreed to by the United States and by the Western European governments, and that it was some of the people in Washington who were sort of wandering off the reservation. It was quite clear that, when the Reagan administration came in, they didn't like this arms control track at all. Alexander Haig and Margaret Thatcher and the Germans had to argue very hard to get back on track to what the two countries had agreed. The Germans made pretty clear that you're not going to have any missiles here if you abandon the arms control track. That kind of blunt talk on the part of the Germans and the British, and even the French ironically, through Alexander Haig in those early months basically did get the U.S. back on track. So the policy that we were representing, even though at times it was not clear that Washington was going to adhere to it, was the U.S. government's official policy and the policy that had been solemnly agreed in a previous administration. Ultimately it was the policy that was carried out. So that, that was the policy that we were representing. I think that, in maintaining your credibility as a diplomat, means occasionally it is permissible to let interlocutors with whom you have a good personal relationship to signal that you have some skepticism about a particular policy. But the way I saw it was it's very important to use your knowledge of what's going on on the American side to explain what may seem irrational - to explain the political realities in the United States. This is especially easy when you're dealing with the representatives of a foreign democracy. I mean, they understand what politicians do, and they understand how domestic issues often dominate in policies that have a foreign policy element. So to me that was part of what my job was - to help them understand why Reagan would do what he was doing, what he really meant to do. Oftentimes it was much more benign in its intention than in its application. So in a sense I was defending the American government by explaining why Reagan was doing these things.

Q: How did you find the German media treated this whole issue while you were there, '82 to '85?

THIELMANN: Well, there were a lot of sharp criticism in the media, and I think it would really be a minority of the media that, in the views of most Americans, would treat the United States fairly. There was a lot of slanted analysis and sort of snide remarks, but then there was also a great underlying reservoir of good will. There was a lot of gratitude about our role in the post-war era. At least on the conservative side of the spectrum there was a lot of support for the essential U.S. role in helping the Germans cope with this huge threat right on their borders. Even on the other side, beyond all the sniping I think even on the left, there were very few who just wanted to get the Americans out of Germany. So part of it was I think developing a thick skin for some of the snide carping at the time and understanding and appreciating that there were very deep roots for the implicit contract between Germany and the U.S. Germany would put up with tanks rolling over farm lands and jets screaming overhead and everything because it didn't want to think about the alternative.

Q: While you were there what developed in your particular field? Up to '85, how did things stand?

THIELMANN: Actually it was in '85, no it was in '83, that there was a critical Bundestag vote. It ultimately got down to a vote of the German parliament whether or not to go forward with the deployments of cruise missiles and Pershing-II missiles in Germany. There was tentativeness as regards the Germans signing on the bottom line. Kind of all the way up to the very end, I mean, the German government basically used as leverage that they hadn't really approved that arrival of the first missile in order to get the U.S. to have more forthcoming arms control policy. It played out in a very dramatic way when the U.S. was supposed to send the first systems over. They just could not land until the Germans said yes and the German parliament had a debate. I remember bicycling down to the parliament because of the huge crowds to witness it. The parliament voted to approve it. Within hours the first Pershing-II missiles landed at Frankfurt, and the head of the Social Democrats, leading spokesman said this was a black day in German history. The Soviets reacted by stomping out of the U.S.-Soviet INF arms control talks and threatened commensurate deployments on the Soviet side, which of course they already had. So all they could do was to make some gestures about deploying SS-20 missiles forward.

To me that late 1983 vote was a real watershed in the history of Western Europe. The Soviets had tried everything from the date of the December dual track decision of NATO until that vote. They had tried everything to make sure that the Germans never accepted the missile deployments. They could use the fear of new missile deployments and the Soviet reaction to bring about a sea change in the German political scene. It didn't work. I mean the German parliament and the government held even though it wasn't very popular among the people. There really was a solid consensus by the majority of the parliament in representing the parties that this was a necessary thing to do. That was really the beginning of serious Soviet negotiations on INF even though it wasn't recognized as such at the time. It was only really when Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union and had Shevardnadze as foreign minister that the Soviets could acknowledge to themselves that they had really blown it. They had had not thought through the implications of modernizing their intermediate range nuclear forces in a way which was such a provocation that the West really had to react. They overestimated their ability to play the Europeans against the United States on this issue and create a deep schism in the North Atlantic Alliance. So I was able to witness in the time that I was in Germany that whole drama going up to the vote and then the initial setback in relations or apparent setback but seeing under the surface that the Soviets were being forced to adjust to the objective realities in Europe.

Q: Well, was there much lobbying on the part of our embassy or through intermediaries of the members of the Bundestag? I mean did you get involved in any of this or not?

THIELMANN: Yes, I think there was, particularly those who were on the foreign affairs committee, and defense committee. They were close contacts; we would invite them to our functions. We would try to provide them with information. In a parliamentary democracy obviously we were working most closely with those members of the government who held the cabinet portfolios and the chancellor himself. But there was also a significant public affairs program. Even those of us who were not in USIA would take part in this. I made a number of speeches around the country that may not have moved that many Germans but certainly put me in touch with how things looked at the grassroots level in Germany.

Q: What were you getting? What sort of reaction? I mean go down to the equivalent to the local beer parlor, do they often have meetings in places like that?

THIELMANN: Yes, that's true. In my case it was more going to the leadership academy of the Bundeswehr. I'm trying to remember some of the specifics. The Germans would have a lot of conferences, not just for specialists but oftentimes for active members of the political parties and I was sent to some of those events. They were always eager to have people from the embassy explain U.S. positions. It was on some of those occasions that you would confront the average citizens or at least the politically interested.

Q: Did you brace yourselves for real hostility or not?

THIELMANN: There was some real hostility. I mean, there was a part of the German population that was closely aligned with the Communist Party. I think it was after Grenada if I remember correctly. Within hours of the news of our attack there was a huge mob of Germans with red banners outside our embassy. The Marines all had their fatigues and helmets on and shotguns. We had to wait a couple of hours that day before we could leave the embassy because the assumption was that our safety would be endangered by trying to get through this crowd of angry Germans. So there was that element of the population. A lot of the response to speaking events was more along the lines of the Germans complaining in sorrow about U.S. insensitivity, and one of the frequent lines was the U.S. had no idea what war was like and that Germany did. It had fought two of them, and one of them was fought very much in Germany, in the cities and towns. So a lot of it was in a tone of people sympathetic to the U.S. but frustrated with U.S. policies and U.S. insensitivity about issues. There were occasional sharp dialogues about the cynicism behind U.S. policies. They didn't believe that we really wanted an arms control outcome. Then there were a lot of good, objective, polite questions. So when on those occasions when I would go out it really covered the full spectrum. It was hard to say if I would just meet angry farmers with pitchforks or whatever. It was the kind of forum that I suspect a foreign embassy person would get in the United States on the Iraq war with expressions of frustration and anger over why the Europeans weren't getting on board. It was that level of discourse.

Q: Well, then you left there in 1985. Where did you go?

THIELMANN: I went to Ambassador Nitze's office. He was Special Assistant to the President and the Secretary of State for Arms Control. Nitze had taken that position after heading the U.S. delegation at the INF talks. I guess he moved back to Washington after the negotiations were suspended following the German vote and the deployment. He really became much more the advisor to George Shultz than the advisor to the president although both were in his title. In putting together a small office of special assistants, he wanted to include in that group people who were very knowledgeable about Europe. So I was basically recruited. Right after I decided on a fourth year in Germany because it was a great job and Bonn was a great place to be, I got a call from Nitze's administrative head who said that he wanted me in Washington. I protested. I had just agreed on a fourth year and it was out of cycle. I didn't know how that would go over in the embassy. Of course I was being very naïve about how easily someone called the Assistant to the President/Secretary of State can break assignments. It was no problem.

Q: So you did this from when to when?

THIELMANN: So I did this from the summer of 1985 to the summer of 1986. It was a one-year job.

Q: How did Nitze stand within the administration at this point, particularly with the President and the White House and the State Department?

THIELMANN: One of the great ironies was that Nitze was perceived as a dove in the Reagan administration. Looking at Nitze's whole career, he might be seen as being similar to a number of kinds of birds but never a dove. The reason he was perceived as a dove was because Richard Perle - feared and feared correctly - that Paul Nitze was someone who was results oriented, and, if he would be made negotiator, he would then want to negotiate an agreement - not any agreement of course. It would be an agreement that would have to meet Nitze's severe standards for defending U.S. interests. But Perle was right. Nitze would take an impossible position and turn it into a "walk in the woods" solution, which was both consistent with U.S. security objectives and bold under circumstances that no one would have predicted could have been possible. There were those in the White House and certainly the Defense Department who were very hostile to Nitze and saw him as a threat to their agenda, which was a very tough, no-holds barred kind of approach to the Soviet Union. It's very important to realize the fragility of Nitze's standing in the U.S. government to understand what happened farther down the line when, for example, Nitze supported the White House reinterpretation of the ABM (anti-ballistic missiles) treaty, in what was I think one of the low points in Nitze's career since he knew better. But he was in a very vulnerable position. So he was in a great position with the Germans. He was in an excellent position with George Shultz, Secretary of State, who thought extremely highly of Nitze and who relied heavily on Nitze's advice on arms control matters. That's one of the things that made it such a pleasure to be working in that office because just the knowledge that the Secretary of State took Nitze into his confidences and relied heavily on him was very heady stuff for those couple of us who were special assistants.

Q: Talk about working with Paul Nitze. How did he operate in this particular time frame?

THIELMANN: Nitze was someone who kept a Monday to Friday schedule, who would not come in on Saturdays unless there was something urgent that had to be attended to. He was already in his seventies so that's perhaps understandable. But it was not consistent with everything else in the crazy State Department culture. I mean, everyone went in on Saturday in a hot office because business continued six days a week and that's what people did. Some of us special assistants often came in over the weekend too, but you didn't have to worry about looking bad in front of your boss because he wasn't there for the most part. Nitze was so impressive in so many ways. He was a get down to the basics person and was a fantastic note taker. He would come back from a meeting with penciled notes, and he could kind of read back to us like verbatim coverage of what was said in a meeting. He would give us his notes to read. His writing was legible. Things like that I thought were very impressive. Nitze maintained a wide variety of contacts that he had developed over the years so that he was constantly getting inputs, not through just the normal channels, but from some people on let's say the fringes or who were kind of eccentric or kind of out of the mainstream. Nitze would appreciate intellects. He would appreciate arguing with people. He had a steady stream of people like that coming through his office. He also had Strobe Talbott coming to his office fairly regularly. I think those meetings were the basis of Talbott's books-

Q: Strobe Talbott at the time was-

THIELMANN: He was with Time Magazine, just a journalist who ended up writing what are probably the best pieces of diplomatic history on the nuclear arms control talks in the Reagan administration. I think that probably the ground rules at the time when Nitze was talking to him fairly regularly were that none of this could be published until some future point. But it ended up with a lot of very good inside reports on what was going on. So, of course, we appreciated very much that Nitze would share with his small staff, what was really a maximum of three, conversations with George Shultz or meetings with the president. Nitze was also professional in that he played things close to the vest. I mean, if he would tell us things that other people said that would make people normally roll their eyes, Nitze would not roll his eyes. He would give it to us straight without comment. So in that respect he did not tear down those people for whom he worked. He would just make sure that those who were working for him knew what the context was and what we were doing. So I ended up respecting him greatly for his contributions of intellect, in his particular roll in this particular administration. In spite of his very disappointing participation in what was basically a fraudulent sell to the American public about what the ABM treaty meant. This was one of the ways in the Reagan administration he made policy. He made speeches, which we got clearance on, and no one else was articulating as deeply and articulately what our policy was as Nitze. So then it gradually it became policy.

Q: Well, now during this '85-'86 period, what were the issues that he was dealing with? The Soviets had walked out, and we didn't know it, but they were waiting for the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze team to assert their control.

THIELMANN: Well, at that time the negotiations resumed, and our delegation was headed by Mike Glidden who had been Nitze's deputy in the INF, the State Department representative on the delegation. So there was a close relationship there, and Nitze was basically the great eminence back in Washington, the grand strategist on, not just INF, but also on strategic arms control and the adviser to George Shultz. So the negotiations resumed. The real drama in Washington during the year period was on the ABM treaty. This was basically a story of Richard Perle hiring a New York lawyer who had no experience in arms control but as a hired gun who would go back in the negotiating record, and deliver the results that Perle wanted, which is to say that lo and behold we did not get the anti-ballistic missile treaty which we thought we had gotten from the Soviets and which the Soviets acknowledged giving to us. So Perle's lawyer came back and said, "Oh no actually there's no restrictions on what the U.S. does in space in testing exotic technologies like lasers and everything." I have this very vivid memory of coming back from this astounding meeting when Perle rolled out his legal analysis and his startling news and telling Nitze about it. Nitze was quite upset to hear that and actually very impatient with me. I mean, it was a classic case of shooting the messenger and delivered as a not so polite tutorial on what the ABM treaty actually says about systems based on other physical principles including getting out the treaty, reading it to me, and telling me what he, Paul Nitze, had negotiated with his Soviet counterparts since he was one of the principal negotiators of this treaty. I was sort of cowed, I mean it's bad enough to have to be told about what a treaty means but even more degrading in a way by the person who negotiated it. But then sadly over the next month, and I know because I was involved in being Nitze's mouthpiece at various meetings in terms of interpretations and talking points and Qs and As, Nitze's position evolved very rapidly from that lecture to me and then one month later when he was saying what the treaty meant. I don't think that it was Nitze being convinced about the negotiating record, but Nitze responding to what the political situation was and his vulnerability with the White House if he got in the way of what they wanted to do. He was also visited by and influenced by the legal advisor to the State Department whose name escapes me at the moment, but who was also a good friend of Richard Perle, who did a number of things for Reagan including persuading the State Department lawyers to view that dropping mines in the harbor of Nicaragua was not inconsistent with international law.

Q: Sounds familiar.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: To the present administration.

THIELMANN: Yes, it does have a familiar ring to it.

Q: All of a sudden torture is all right, this reinterpretation.

THIELMANN: Yes, that's right. Well, anyway, he met frequently with Nitze. But I was sort of convinced that Nitze intellectually bought the case here. But I think what Nitze saw was an opportunity for using this as leverage with the Soviets. I think in Nitze's mind this is something you concede later in negotiations. You have this bizarre interpretation being propounded as high as the president of the United States, and then all of a sudden you've got a new bargaining chip. You've got a new reality that you can play with the Soviets. What Nitze wasn't expecting was this was all behind the scenes. What Nitze wasn't expecting was that Bud McFarland, the president's national security advisor, would actually announce to the public on a Sunday morning news program what the new U.S. position was. Then all of a sudden Nitze had to start doing major damage control to avoid this turning into a catastrophe with our European allies and the American public and the Congress, who, if they delved deeply enough into it, would know that this was basically a fraud. So Nitze very quickly kind of recaptured the public control of the issue so that the administration position became, "well, even though we have a legal right to do these things, we're not going to do them right now." So Nitze tried to at least maintain the negotiating leverage with the Soviets without the vulnerability of drawing so much fire on this wacky interpretation. It was certainly impressive issue crisis management by Nitze to do this, but even more impressive was what was being done in parallel on the U.S. strategic defense initiative that was just getting seriously underway then by the administration. Nitze using all of his Defense Department and systems analysis expertise managed to work into his speech what then became part of the Holy Grail of U.S. administration policy - that we would only deploy strategic ballistic missile defense systems that were cost effective at the margin. Any sober analyst on this subject knew this would never happen because you were never going to make it cheaper for the United States to deploy a strategic ballistic missile system than it is for an opponent to add the nth nuclear weapon to overcome that system. So this was really a masterful piece of jujitsu. By Nitze getting this into policy it then became something which stuck in the craw every time the Pentagon tried to do something on SDI because they constantly had to confront-

Q: SDI, strategic-

THIELMANN: Strategic defense initiative. They constantly had to confront that damned Nitze criterion that they couldn't in the rational world really overcome. So he really planted the seeds of destruction in the whole star wars effort.

Q: Well, were you there at the time when Reagan made the star wars speech?

THIELMANN: Well, that was 1983 and so I was I guess in Germany at the time.

Q: How seriously were we taking this? A lot of people were saying, the thing is still around today, of having an anti-missile system. How seriously was this thing taken?

THIELMANN: My understanding at the time when Reagan gave this speech in March of 1983, was that Weinberger and Perle were not in favor of missile defenses. No one in their right mind was in favor of this because it wouldn't work. The scientists knew it wouldn't work.. The U.S. had gone this route before, spent billions, and ended up with a deployed system in North Dakota: the Pyramid of the Plains. The system was operational for about eight or nine months and then shut down. So even though the ABM treaty allowed the U.S. to have a hundred ABM interceptors, we never exercised it because it made no sense for us. Reagan gave the speech, nothing happened for a year or so. But eventually the conservatives saw this was a great advantage in helping sabotage arms control. Then there was some true believers that thought it would actually work. Richard Perle didn't, I think. A lot of the people were just cynical about it, seeing it as just a vehicle to destroy arms control and sabotage relations with the Soviet Union.

Q: During the time you were there, did you get any feel for the relationship between Paul Nitze and Caspar Weinberger? I mean, the relationship between George Shultz and Weinberger is pretty well documented. They didn't like each other from way back.

THIELMANN: I'm sorry between whom?

Q: George Shultz and Weinberger.

THIELMANN: Oh right, yes.

Q: This went back to California days, but what about dealing with Weinberger. Did he come into the picture?

THIELMANN: I don't remember too much about Nitze and Weinberger. I don't think they had very many personal dealings and just because of the hierarchy and the fact that Nitze was working for Shultz and Perle was working for Weinberger, and Weinberger delegated enormously to Richard Perle. I mean Perle was an assistant secretary of defense who reported to Undersecretary of Defense Freddy Clay, but for all practical purposes he was the secretary of defense on these issues. I mean he decided the issues and Weinberger backed him up. So the real personal interaction was always between Perle and Nitze. I don't really know - I certainly saw no evidence that Nitze had any respect for Weinberger's Defense Department management or his intellectual contribution.

Q: Was Perle at that time known within the State Department as the Prince of Darkness?

THIELMANN: Absolutely. It was partly because of his dishonesty and lack of reliability in personal dealings that he had that point of view. He was seen by many as being more representative of the Israeli government than the American government. This is someone who is a saboteur of arms control and a totally unreliable interlocutor. There was a funny incident though that I remember back from my time in Bonn. Perle was very, very persuasive and articulate on television and in public. He was not a screamer. He was very calm. He was rational. He expressed himself very well and had a sharp wit. There were a number of cases in which spouses would hear their well, mostly husbands complain about this guy Perle coming back from the bureaucratic battles fields of Washington. Then their spouses would see him on TV or whatever and say, "Well, what are you so upset about? He seems reasonable to me." Even in Bonn when Perle was visiting the embassy and sitting around a table next to Ambassador Burns. Perle was on one side and I think Root Phelps was on the other side. Ambassador Burns at one point had the terrible indiscretion to turn to Phelps and say something like, "Well, Mr. Phelps, I've been talking to Mr. Perle here and he doesn't sound so unreasonable to me."

Q: Well, what about the White House, the national security counsel and just the White House, the White House quote/unquote. When you were there, was this an element that Nitze dealt with?

THIELMANN: Well, he had to some. There were two people, I think I might have misspoken his name but General Schweitzer in at least the first year or two of the administration had sort of a dual management of these issues. You would go to meetings, and you'd have General Schweitzer and Sven Kramer. They were the two National Security Counsel representatives who would attend all these meetings. Both of them had very ideological, and by current standards I think, rather extreme views on these issues. They were really the faces of the NSC. The actual national security advisers first Richard Allen and then Judge Clark, they were not heavy hitters. They were not really engaged that much in these issues. So you really had these assistants, NSC assistants who were trying to control issues with Richard Burke representing the State Department and Richard Perle representing the Defense Department. Then everyone was sort of battling for the mind of Ronald Reagan who didn't really understand the issues and what was happening. That was kind of the lineup that I remember.

Q: Well, it sounds like there was a time when it really did allow strong-minded people to seize control of power. I mean as we've found with Ollie North-

THIELMANN: Yes. Very good example.

Q: I mean, when you have a president who is detached at the top, who's not so - doesn't really care for control - it allows a bunch of people to start running around doing things on their own because of their strong beliefs. At the time did you have that feeling that nobody was really in charge?

THIELMANN: Yes, I did have that feeling. It was like the policy was made instead of coherently it was made by what speeches you could get out, what words you could use and kind of Byzantine maneuverings and sort of sending something over to NSC and hoping that they wouldn't block it or they would endorse it somehow. But you never knew who was endorsing it. I'm not sure when Poindexter took charge of it. But this whole period, when Reagan was allegedly head of the national security establishment, decisions were being made by many people and not the president. You didn't really get a sense that the president had a firm hand on the rudder.

Q: Well, in your role as a special assistant, did you have contacts over at the NSC who were telling you, "hey this seems to be coming down the track," or something like that or weren't you part of the process.

THIELMANN: Well, I seem to remember that I would get on the phone with Sven Kramer or see him at meetings. That was sort of the face of the NSC to me, not the national security advisor.

Q: You left there in '86.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: I think this is probably a good place to stop, but where did you go then?

THIELMANN: Then actually in the foreign service I had decided not to extend a second year partly out of frustration. Nitze still seemed to be on a losing side of various issues there. I kind of saw the limits of what I could do and wanted to do the next ambitious thing in the foreign service, which is to bid on a job in embassy Moscow, be the political military affairs officer. I did that, was assigned to it, but this was, I'm trying to remember now whether I had known that or not. What I did immediately after Nitze was to go to the Pearson Program to the Hill to work in the office of Senator Tom Harkin. I guess I'm remembering that it was actually only during that year that I bid on the Soviet job. So when I left Nitze, it was only to go to work on the Hill in the Pearson Program. In the back of my mind it was an opportunity to atone for my sins in misleading the American people on star wars, which I was able to do by working for a liberal Democratic Senator, Tom Harkin, as his legislative assistant for defense issues.

Q: He was senator from where?

THIELMANN: From Iowa.

Q: From Iowa.

THIELMANN: Which is my state, which meant it was a very convenient comfortable position since I didn't feel that anyone in the office cared more about the state than I did even though I was sort of the strange foreign affairs officer, a visitor from another planet.

Q: Well, we'll pick this up then in '86 when you are working with Senator Tom Harkin, and we'll talk about SDI and Iowa issues too that you saw at the time. You did it for a year and then we'll move on. Great.

Today is the 11th of February, 2005. Greg, okay. Senator Harkin - tell me what was your impression. We'll talk about that year. This is when? This is nineteen-

THIELMANN: This would be 1986, 1986 to '87.

Q: What piece of the action were you given?

THIELMANN: When I first spoke with Harkin's office, I took the initiative because Iowa was my home state, and I had had some previous experience with the Democratic Party in Iowa. At that time there was one person who was covering both foreign affairs and also defense issues for Senator Harkin in a legislative assistant position. So the incumbent felt that this was a pretty heavy load, and, after a short talk, he thought that it would be great if I would in effect worry about the defense issues side of his portfolio. I think his heart was in the foreign affairs side of it. Most of the work was in the foreign affairs side. So he saw that as an attractive way to take care of part of his responsibility. Although I was professionally coming out of the foreign affairs sector, much of my work had been on political-military issues and arms control issues, it seemed like a good fit for the office as well. So my official title really was congressional fellow. That's what I think was on my card. In foreign service terms, Pearson Program Fellow. But for all practical purposes I was Harkin's LA or legislative assistant for defense issues. I felt very fortunate doing that because many of my Pearson Program colleagues would go into a staff position on the foreign affairs committee or usually that. Sometimes they would rotate through other positions briefly. But I could in effect for the entire legislative cycle, the entire year, assume full responsibilities for defense issues, meaning that I would help provide guidance to those people who would answer correspondent mail on defense issues. I could take the initiative proposing legislation on certain issues. I could write speeches for Senator Harkin on anything related to defense issues and then participate in those various meetings among other staffers when they would try to devise strategy to either frustrate the administration purposes or guide legislation. So it was a very rich year for me, and in some senses it was good for my soul since I had a lot of cognitive dissonance on certain elements of the Reagan foreign policy, specifically on arms control about which the Reagan administration was very skeptical. On many of the specific assessments that the Reagan administration delivered on the threat, the way it characterized Soviet military power and a lot of the specifics about the way the world was, was from my personal assessment simply dead wrong - not an accurate description of the world. It was more comfortable for me actually writing from the perspective of this Democratic liberal senator about U.S. defense policies in that era.

Q: Now this was a time when Caspar Weinberger was Secretary of Defense, and they were turning on the, I don't want to call it, the red book or something.

THIELMANN: It was the Soviet military power.

Q: Yes, and I mean it certainly was from a hawkish perspective. Could you talk about how this was viewed and all at the time?

THIELMANN: I think future students of history will look back on this sort of a classic case of exaggeration, hyperbole, distortion, some things that were just flat untrue. Obviously we can do that now with the benefit of hindsight as Soviet archives open up, and we can be a little bit more objective with distance. But on a number of issues whether it was the range of the backfire medium range bomber, which was represented by this crowd as being a intercontinental heavy bomber and therefore something which the fatally flawed SALT treaties had left out. Of course we found out, as many people in the intelligence community said at the time, this was a medium range bomber. There was another bomber coming out - the blackjack bomber which was a heavy bomber, an intercontinental bomber. So that was a case of, to put it charitably, a big mistake or, less charitably, a deliberate misrepresentation, even when the administration correctly described a violation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty. The Soviets were building a large phased radar at Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. This was indeed a violation, but the administration said that this violation proved that the Soviets were breaking out of the anti-ballistic missile treaty restrictions because the treaty allowed such radars only to be at the perimeter and oriented outward of the Soviet Union. Well, the real reason we know now that they built it where they did in the interior was not so much to enable them to have a ballistic missile defense, but rather that was where the edge of the permafrost was. The construction would be much greater elsewhere, which doesn't mean they shouldn't have been taken to task for the violation. But the conclusions that were drawn from this were just one of the many conclusions that Weinberger and the Reaganauts used to argue that the Soviet Union was in lockstep march toward world conquest and wanted to use its enormous superiority. I mean one of the Reagan lines at the time or at the beginning of his administration and during his initial campaign in 1980 was that the Soviets were engaged in the largest strategic arms build up the world had ever seen. Well, objectively speaking that wasn't true at all. The largest and most dramatic strategic build up the world had ever seen was in the Kennedy administration when we were simultaneously deploying Minutemen missiles and Polaris missile submarines and modernizing our bomber force. I mean, that was far more dramatic in terms of its simultaneous modernization than anything the Soviets were doing. The Soviets were in a lot of ways just playing catch up with the American warhead numbers. So there was great frustration on my part while in the administration to have to repeat and justify and elaborate on all these extremely exaggerated claims. Working for Harkin I could point out some of the exaggerations, speak more factually and put in perspective what was going on.

Q: Well, did you find working for Harkin was in a way well placed because, and correct me if I'm wrong, Iowa was not, is not like Florida, California, Texas, Virginia or some place with a huge military complex in it.

THIELMANN: That's exactly right. One could argue that Iowa senators are not going to be objective about ethanol, and likewise one could argue that the senator from Virginia is not going to be very objective about building submarines or aircraft carriers. Iowa had one of the lowest receipts of the federal defense dollar of all states. That obviously allowed Harkin some room in his argumentation. In general Harkin was for spending less money on defense than, let's say, the average member of Congress, and yet Harkin was a former Navy pilot and someone who actually during the Vietnam war flew damaged aircraft out of Vietnam to repair bases elsewhere in the Pacific - not exactly a combat job but not a safe job either. He had the credibility of being a Navy pilot and a veteran, which at least gave him a leg up on some others who had never served. So it was very interesting, and Harkin also had a particular interest in certain aeronautical issues and space issues. So that meant that as a staffer for him, I didn't have to spend as much time explaining how things work or what things do as other staffers might. Harkin seemed to trust the general thrust of my thinking on defense issues and trusted that I could represent him in his overall outlook. As a result of that trust, I was allowed to draft a series for Iowa's largest newspaper, the Des Moines Register, on what the U.S. defense policy should be. I think I was actually useful for giving Harkin some credibility among those who would be inclined to represent him as a knee-jerk liberal who was opposed to all defense spending. And for being able to articulate for him an approach to defense which called for increases in some areas and a coherence in our spending and our defense posture, which did not put U.S. defense policy at cross purpose with some of the other objectives of the government. That was very satisfying and I think worked out very well. Then there were some other I guess serendipitous events in which because I was in the foreign service and not knowledgeable about the way the State Department worked.

At that time the State Department was not represented with any offices on the Hill. In startling contrast to the Pentagon, for example, which had fully staffed offices on both the House side and the Senate side and their representatives would roam around asking members of Congress what they could do for the congressmen. "Can we fly you to Europe? Can we fly you some place? Can we arrange a trip for you? Can we line up your meetings with constituents in the service and that kind of thing." All the State Department could seem to offer members of Congress was on the phone explanations for why it wasn't the right time to visit this country and why whatever the congressman wanted to do wasn't good for our relations with a particular country. I'm making a caricature, but this is unfortunately the view that many congressmen had of the State Department. So one of the things I could do as a fellow in Harkin's office was at least to relatively easily talk to desk officers and others about the substance behind issues. Oftentimes I would notice members of Congress would want to write a bill to introduce legislation on a particular subject and I would ask, "Well, what does the State Department say about that." I would get shrugs all around. No one had any idea what the substantive arguments were against something such as whether it was naming the square outside the Soviet embassy Sakharov Plaza, as Iowa's other Republican senator wished to do at the time, or any other policy which would burden the Department of State in the conduct of foreign relations. Usually, it wasn't the member of Congress's argument against another argument. There was no other argument in the conversation of the staffers. So on at least a couple of occasions, I was able to fill that in a little bit without being necessarily an advocate for the State Department but just explaining what the problems were with this particular idea.

Q: What happened to the Sakharov Square idea?

THIELMANN: The street signs went up I think and it was one other provocation for the Soviets. I was a big fan of Sakharov. So this was not the worst thing that we could do.

Q: No, no.

THIELMANN: What I did witness was and this came home personally because after the year in Congress I went to Moscow, was to see the way the bugging of the new U.S. chancery there was exploited sort of shamelessly by politicians of various sides. That was another of those issues in which very few people knew what the circumstances were, but it was an extremely attractive area for political exploitation. I mean, the members of Congress were talking about how stupid the State Department was to let this all happen right under its nose. There was the conventional wisdom on the Hill about how the State Department is such a bad negotiator that years ago we got this terrible location in Moscow, a horrible bugged building, whereas the Soviets negotiated a high hilltop position in Washington that allowed them to monitor electronically all these sensitive sites in Washington. That's just one of those many generalizations which on the inside looked entirely different. I mean I knew later as a foreign service officer in Moscow that we were a short walk away from the Soviet foreign ministry. There was a much longer drive for Soviet diplomats going from their new embassy to Capitol Hill or any of the executive parts of Washington. The idea that the only reason to have an embassy in a city is to conduct electronic surveillance I thought was a rather incomplete understanding of what a foreign affairs relationship is all about. So the problem in Moscow was not the location of our embassy. It was certain other problems. But that was one of those issues that was not dealt with substantively.

Q: Did you find yourself dealing with some staffers. I mean here you could see a balance. I mean as I've talked to people who said there was a so-called Soviet Threat. They had some major military formations more or less ready to go in Europe and all it needed was somebody to say go and they'd go. Whether they'd win or lose, there still would be utter devastation. You couldn't treat that lightly. Did you find yourself up against people who maybe were a little too much under the sway of the academic world and thinking maybe as a result of the '60s, "Oh there's no real problem if we only think positively" and all that?

THIELMANN: "Can't we all just be friends?"

Q: Yes. Yes.

THIELMANN: You would encounter that. You would encounter people who seemed to not even see those 22 Soviet divisions line up right across the inter-German border. I mean those divisions were not fictional and those Soviet army soldiers were not, let's say, what we found out the Iraqi army was in March of 2003. So you did encounter that but I would have to say on the whole that many of, even though many of my counterpart staffers were young and inexperienced, it may have just been the pragmatism of the folly of taking the Defense Department head on. I'm not quite sure, but they really did seem to operate more in the real world than I might have expected. They weren't sort of academic theorists about these things. They did seem to understand-I'm talking about the people who were opposed to the rapid increases in the defense budget. There still seemed to be a solid core of support for real defense spending.

Q: It is an article of faith in some Republican circles that it was a deliberate policy of the Reagan administration to put a lot of money into defense and essentially break the Soviet Union when they tried to meet us. This is part of the reason for the collapse. Was this a theory or idea that's going around at the time?

THIELMANN: I think it was much more of an ex-post facto theory. I didn't hear very many predictions in the mid-1980s from the Republicans or anyone else that the Soviet Union was going to collapse. Instead just the opposite - the Soviet Union that the hard-line Republicans presented was this juggernaut, this steamroller, which we were barely able to keep up with. We had to spend every penny on defense just to prevent the Soviets from attacking us or taking advantage of us in various parts of the world. We needed things like the 600-ship Navy to be able to come up with a new sort of military, new military leverage so that the Soviets would have something to worry about. We could threaten them with an amphibious assault in the Bering Strait or the Norwegian Sea. It was not that we were doing all this just to provide the final little push for a decrepit Soviet system, not at all. This seemed to me much more of a theory that was developed after we spent the Soviets into oblivion. I have a different take on that. I really think that the belligerence of the Reagan administration and the defense spending increases that the Reagan administration introduced, actually delayed positive things happening in the Soviet Union because it made it very difficult for the reformers like Gorbachev to argue that the Soviet Union was not threatened, that there was a need to concentrate on the grievous domestic requirements of the Soviet state. I mean the Soviet Union was always sort of on a war footing whether because of its own imagination or not. But this just maintained that war footing to have a belligerent enemy where the president would make jokes about bombing the Soviet Union in front of a microphone. I have really kind of a 180-degree different interpretation about who won the Cold War.

Q: Well, now what about the Defense Department? Was Richard Perle there at the time?

THIELMANN: Richard Perle was there at the time.

Q: Well, I mean you were sort of Senator Harkin's gray eminent sitting behind him. I mean did you get on the Pentagon's enemies list or do you think or not?

THIELMANN: I really wouldn't have played my role to give myself that much honor. I think I have to add that one of the things about Harkin was, even though he had a distinct sort of anti-defense bias or profile, he was, maybe through no coincidence, not on the defense appropriations sub-committee. He was not on the armed services committee. So in some sense he didn't enter the radar screen of the Pentagon. I mean they have to curry favor with or they're most interested in currying favor with those key senators who control Defense Department budgets and are seen in the Congress as being the defense experts. Harkin was outside of that. So he did not have the clout and the weight that some of the others who were members of the armed service committee had. Probably in some ways I might not have been able to get the position I did if Harkin was up and running actually as he is now because he is on the defense appropriations sub-committee. It would've been hard for me to come in from the outside because it would have been a bigger chunk of the ongoing action in his office.

Q: What impression were you gaining about the politics of the Senate in those days?

THIELMANN: Well, one of the things that I saw first hand which was very depressing was just how much time senators have to devote to fundraising, even in the Senate. They have six years between elections, and yet it was just very depressing to see that every senator had to spend a lot of time on the phone raising money. A big chunk of their job was raising funds. That certainly fueled my own personal thoughts about the need for campaign finance reform because it was not a good expenditure of taxpayer funds to send people to Washington to raise funds for their re-election. So that was sort of one political observation about the way things worked.

Another observation was how much leverage members of the Congress had when their vote could not be counted on to go one way or another. So in a way the vote of people like Harkin, who operated I would say more on principle than certain others did, was not much up for grabs on as many issues as let's say a Senator Nunn. I don't want to put, I don't want to make this a pejorative comment on those who were sort of straddling the fence. One can arrive at their own judgments about that. There are a lot of issues that are very complicated, and one could argue that people who understand complicated issues can be persuaded one way or another depending on how things come down on a particular case. But for whatever reason that was another way in which Harkin yielded up some of his potential power. Because on many of the arms control issues for example, Harkin saw the value of negotiated security arrangements that were not perfect as being far better than no treaty at all. Other senators who might have left everyone in doubt about whether they were going to ratify a certain arms control treaty or not would have more leverage over insisting that the Senate passed a resolution tacking it onto a ratification act for example. So just to see some of those ways about the way the Senate operated. Also there was a, there really is a club aspect of the Senate and an opportunity for bipartisan operations maybe less now in the highly partisan divide. On this subject, I noticed within the last week an article written by Senator Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, talking about how he and Tom Harkin Democrat of Iowa were working together on a particular issue. It was a very nonpartisan approach, which was very interesting to me because Harkin is often labeled as a very partisan senator. I got, as a result of that year, a lot of ground truth on the real dynamics of the Senate, how things get done, how staff members can have a lot of influence and how the influence is divided among the actual elected representatives and those who had the time and the responsibility for going through all the details of bills that members of the Senate oftentimes cannot. So a lot of very useful insight and a strong feeling at the end of the year that the State Department was not using their foreign service resources very well because they would send ten of us up to the Hill every year. At the end of the year that was it. Then we would resume our career and do whatever we wanted. I argued in the Foreign Service Journal for example after I got back that it would be much better if the foreign service would have people bid on a two-year assignment related to Congress - one year on the Hill and then maybe one year back in the legislative affairs bureau so that the foreign service could get some immediate payback from that investment. I think the foreign service clearly got payback and a very good investment because U.S. diplomats are much better off if they understand from the inside how the U.S. Congress works. So there was definitely an advantage to be gained whether or not this was done or not. But I always thought they would get maximum advantage to let those people coming back for the Hill utilize right away all the personal relationships they had formed to inform the Department where the opportunities were with members of the Hill. The connectivity was sort of shockingly low. I mean, I spent my year on the Hill with nary a call from anyone in the State Department. I mean, I would reach out to get information, but no one would ever call me and ask what's going on in the Senate. Obviously that made my job easier in a way because there was no worry about me being a fifth column for the Hill, but it did make me wonder where the Legislative Affairs Bureau was. Why weren't they at least touching base to find out what was going on on the Hill? I think the foreign service could utilize the people on the Hill better than it does. I'm a big believer in the program. I think it's very good, and it should not just be used as a way for members of the foreign service to catch their breath or fill in a year between other assignments. It should be more deliberate.

Q: Well, then in '87 wither?

THIELMANN: In '87 I went to Russian language training. So that was one of the nice things about my year on the Hill that I knew from the first that I would be entering Russian language training a year hence and then going to Moscow two years from the time I started on the Hill. That certainty about the future certainly helped me order things better. So in '87 I entered Russian language training in a ten-month program, realizing early on that I was at a certain disadvantage because so many of my classmates had either studied Russian in college or they were coming back from a tour in Yugoslavia with at least three-three Serbo-Croatian or they knew Polish or something like that. So I was really in the minority that had to struggle from scratch - no Slavic languages. Some unexpected marginal benefits were knowing German and having other foreign languages. I mean, as the saying goes, the second foreign language is easier to learn than the first. I found out that interestingly Russian has a whole slew of words and expressions that come directly from German, mostly in the areas of science and war. So there were a few bonus words thrown in at the beginning that I already knew. But it was tough, and I didn't quite make it up to three-three at the end of the ten months. I got that six months into my tour. But the language was a frustration, because, while I got a minimum level of fluency that would allow me to do business in my area in the language, I never achieved the kind of fluency that I would've liked and I think that would've been possible if on the Russian side the security situation would've been different so that there would've been an easier way for me to plug into the society in which I was living. Diplomatic security in Moscow kept us from receiving any Russian television, for example. They wouldn't allow any cables to go into the embassy compound. We had our antennas, but it was very hard to get any kind of reception of Russian television. So we didn't have that opportunity to enhance our language. There was a conspiracy between the KGB and U.S. diplomatic security to prevent us from knowing any Russian. I say that somewhat facetiously. But in the real world that was a double barrier. Even our Russian language teachers at post at one point were sort of expelled from the embassy. I was going to a Department of Commerce office outside the embassy where we were sort of unwelcome. Then for a while diplomatic security told us we should meet in a little sort of Pizza Hut-like building through which we passed to go into our compound, which was totally inadequate. It seemed at one point when we were literally or at least figuratively told, well, just meet in the snow banks somewhere because we don't want you anywhere near embassy property. So that made it very hard to both solidify and improve the fluency level in Russian.

Q: You were there from eighty-what '88?

THIELMANN: '88 to 1990.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

THIELMANN: The ambassador was Jack Matlock. He arrived a few months before I did and then served another year after I left.

Q: Well, what was the, in '88 when you got there, what was the sort of Soviet-American situation?

THIELMANN: It was a fascinating time to be there because in general our relations were improving with the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was in charge. He was sort of solidifying his power base at the time, much less tentative than when he first took over in nineteen, as head of the Communist Party in 1985. It was, in 1988 the CIA was still fighting a rearguard action to say that Gorbachev was just like all the others. There was nothing new here. He was just a little bit smarter. Our evidence on the ground from Moscow I think showed a different picture that there were a lot of very encouraging and interesting things going on in the Soviet Union. I was right in the middle of one of the most promising changes in Soviet arms control policy.

Q: You're job, what was your job?

THIELMANN: My job, I was the political section's political military affairs officer. So interestingly that portfolio for a number of years before had been handled by one person. It was handled by one person when I was there. Although during the time when I was there, there was also a new office opening up to run the new arms control implementation functions of having inspectors coming into the Soviet Union and everything. So they had several people on that staff, but it was still one person to engage the Soviets on arms control matters to report on what Soviet thinking was both official thinking and in the institutes that wrote on policy and from which some of the ideas derived. It was an overwhelmingly heavy burden. I mean, early on when I arrived there I said we've got to have at least two officers here to take advantage of the new opportunities that were opening up. Because it was only shortly before I arrived that if the embassy political officer wanted to make a demarche on his counterpart on the Soviet foreign ministry, you would write a letter, say what you wanted to talk about, send it over and then wait for days or weeks for a response. There were all kinds of other meetings that you would arrange with similar difficulty or you couldn't arrange them at all. But during that two years that I was there, everything opened up. I mean, when I was there, it was much like in the arms control it was much like serving in a western European embassy. I would call up the phone, ask to talk with my Soviet foreign ministry counterpart, request a meeting, often get it the same day, walk down the street, go into the office and conduct business.

Q: I mean there's a story that I've heard from several sources at some of these arms control meetings between the Soviets and the United States that we would say well, we understand that you have so many war heads and you have this and that. The Soviet military would sort of get white and basically go over and say, "look, our people, these civilians over here, aren't cleared to have this information" even though we had gotten it. They weren't passing it on. So my question is how well plugged into the Soviet military affairs were your counterparts in the foreign ministry?

THIELMANN: This evolved over time. It's certainly true that it was frustrating from the point of view of a military specialist at the State Department because we knew so much more about both our own military force posture and the Soviet military force posture than our Soviet diplomatic counterparts did. So in a lot of ways it was the military that was the more interesting to talk to about these issues. Yet there is a big cultural divide there. The Soviet military did not feel comfortable talking to American diplomats for the most part. They felt much more comfortable talking to their U.S. military counterparts. So we were going through a period of time when one could actually talk with a relative degree of quality from a same general vantage point talking to one of the members of the institutes like Alexei or Bartov, one of the defense specialists.

Q: This is Canadian-American Institute.

THIELMANN: USA and Canada, and then there was another one, ENEMO (European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations?). I can't even remember now what that Soviet acronym stands for, but there were basically two different institutes that had kind of well rounded staffs on a number of foreign policy and international theater questions. Those people would study our own literature pretty extensively. So they knew a lot about Soviet military forces through our literature. Then through their own means they would buttress that with a little bit of knowledge of the Soviet order of battle. But it was a very fascinating time because of all the new things opening, the new possibilities. As a mid-level foreign service officer, much of our work was made more interesting and new opportunities created by both Matlock's efforts as ambassador and also the high level officials coming from the United States, like Defense Secretary Aspen who came to the Soviet Union when I was there. He came actually from the East as I recall, going to Soviet test site in Kazakhstan as well as the space launch Cosmodrome, gaining access to ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missiles) sites, all kinds of things that the U.S. had never done before. I also went with Ambassador Matlock to the Crimea for the first visit of U.S. war ships since World War II to a Soviet port. So all those sort of new experiences were there to be reported on and chronicled by political officers.

Q: What role did the military attachés play? Were you both working on the same thing or how did that work?

THIELMANN: It actually worked very well in Embassy Moscow. I served enough that I've seen that defense attachés sometimes don't work very well with their political section counterparts. The embassy in Moscow at least during my two year window seemed to get some of the most impressive officers. There were two generals who were head of the defense unit in Moscow when I was there, first General Rock and then General Gavin, very different kind of individuals with different kinds of strengths but both very impressive representatives of the military who had good contacts, who were respected by their Soviet counterparts and who would have access to a different kind of things than we would have access to. So once we gained mutual respect, I thought it was a very smooth working relationship in which we both sort of specialized even though the overall subject matter was very similar. We both specialized in making our own individual contributions, and I think I feel pretty good about reporting coming out of Embassy Moscow on the Defense side and the State Department side during that period.

Q: My impression of that period is "trust but verify," Things were really changing in attitude. But the whole idea is okay, but we'll go out there and take a look on the ground. I think this would be very difficult for Soviet officials to adjust to.

THIELMANN: Very difficult. It was a completely different way of life for them. I mean, they were much more indoctrinated with secrecy and secrecy from their own society. I mean the spending amounts, none of those things were anyone's business except the Soviet military. That meant that when later on, when the Duma was introduced, it was an enormous hurdle to get over the idea that members of Congress should know something about what the Soviet military wanted to do or actually fund it. That was really revolutionary.

Q: Well, when you arrived there in 1988, was there any feeling about what would happen in the end of 1989? I mean, the Berlin Wall going and essentially the Soviet bloc falling apart. Was anybody saying oh boy, they're on the brink? What were you getting?

THIELMANN: I think Ambassador Matlock was probably a better authority on this because of his senior position and the kind of correspondence he would have with the top level of the State Department and his being privy to meetings with high level Soviet figures. Not all of that stuff was transparent to us at the time as I've seen from reading some of the things Matlock has written since. I would have to say in general that we did not have a sense of imminent collapse. We had a sense that very important, very significant changes were taking place and that there was some tectonic shifts going on, and I was amazed at the time. I remember being amazed contemporaneously at the kind of things that Shevardnadze would say as Soviet foreign minister. I mean he would say things, he would kind of ridicule the notion, which was really the official Soviet propaganda line, that the NATO countries were looking for opportunities to invade the Soviet Union. I mean, he would more or less say, "Why would they want to do that? There's nothing we have here for them." He would talk fairly openly about the disaster represented by Afghanistan and the deployment of SS-20 missiles as being things which showed the bankruptcy of the Soviet decision making process. Well, this was incredibly sharp and open criticism. This would be quite sharp for a democratic society let alone the kind of the Soviet society represented. So all that was actually going on at the time, and I think a lot of us were saying that because of all that there were more real opportunities here for making arrangements with and dealing differently with the Soviet Union than we had before. I don't think very many people envisioned the speed with which this would happen and what happened in Eastern Europe in the couple months leading up to the fall of the wall. One can certainly point to memos and other things being done only months before the fall of the wall to document that feeling that this really did come out of the blue.

Q: Was there a feeling of comfort with President Reagan at the end of his time and a feeling that here is a man who'd come out of the quite far right in the American political spectrum dealing with the Soviet Union. I'm talking about among you officers there and all that. How did you feel about all this?

THIELMANN: Well, just speaking personally, I mean I was disconcerted from early on at how little interest Reagan had in the details of defense and foreign policy. So I saw him as representing a profound sort of bottomless pit of ignorance which left me feeling very insecure. The thing that made me feel much more calm about Reagan-and I think this extended to many of my colleagues-was that, once he did develop a personal relationship with Gorbachev, after his own demonization of the Soviets as simply being part of an evil empire and as some sort of broodish automatons as part of this Soviet monolith or whatever, Reagan himself developed a different mental image of his negotiating partners. That made a big difference because one got the feeling that now this Administration at the highest level actually wanted to establish a modus vivendi with the Soviet Union, whereas before it seemed like the administration wanted only to intimidate and vanquish this country. So I think the IMF agreement, the signing of that agreement, and the personal relationship that Reagan and Gorbachev developed made everyone feel a little safer and a little more hopeful about the future directions of policy.

Q: Well, now the foreign ministry of any country usually consists of more sophisticated people particularly in a totalitarian, closed society like the Soviets because they've had to deal with the outside. Did you find sort of a relaxation and kind of a sense of fun and enjoyment of doing the job there among your equivalents in the Foreign Ministry?

THIELMANN: I really did. That was one of the most pleasant and satisfying parts of the job. Obviously in the back of my mind was the knowledge about the great divide between the Soviet Union and America. The ideological hostility, the sort of the zero sum notion about U.S.-Soviet relations and all of that very heavy Cold War baggage was in the back of my mind. So it was a special thrill when you thought that you were actually connecting with a Soviet diplomat and that together you were actually advancing the relationship in a way that would benefit both countries and third parties. That was really among the most satisfying parts of my career. I had the good fortune to be dealing with a portfolio that allowed me to engage with some of the most Americanized of all the Soviet diplomats, people who had been engaged with the United States and arms control negotiations previously, some of whom who had served in the United States. Those who had both a good command of English but also - I wouldn't want to overstate this - a more western way of thinking than some of the other diplomats. So I actually went through that time with close contacts with, well, people like Pavel Polischenko the bald-headed face you would see as Gorbachev's interpreter everywhere he went.

Q: Oh yes, the moustache.

THIELMANN: He was actually a Soviet diplomat as well. I would be able to talk to them. With these people I developed a level of trust, which I think is really the prerequisite for effective relations between diplomats. Not to say that one would share all of one's secrets but enough understanding and information that you could rely on what they were saying about making arrangements, or if you could get insight into what the real reasons for a country doing something was going beyond what you were reading in the paper, that kind of relationship. So that was something that I really treasured from the experience, and then of course there was what we would call the "institutniki," the people at the institute, Alexei Bartov, Andrei (inaudible) who were more or less contemporaries in terms of age and had similar professional interests. That too made it a special relationship. I had my fortieth birthday party in Moscow and was able to invite professional contacts to a birthday party in the American embassy compound. I actually felt I was inviting friends who were representing the Soviet government as well as people who were important for me to have as contacts. That just is a little parenthetical aside. That party apparently created fits for the diplomatic security because they were very worried about any Soviet visitors committing a technical attack on the American compound even though our instructions were that we should assume that everything from our bedrooms to our houses was all bugged on the compound. So I don't know if they were worried if the Soviets were going to change their batteries or something, but we actually had to escort them to the bathroom and everything.

Q: This sounds like in a way you were almost viewing the diplomatic security as the equivalent to the KGB. I mean it was almost the enemy.

THIELMANN: They were working for us, and I did at least have sympathy for what they were trying to do. But I didn't have much sympathy for the way they executed it or their degree of sophistication. I mean we got the strong feeling that diplomatic security would be most happy if we would just shut down the embassy and go home or else that we would never leave the embassy. That is, you didn't get a very strong sense that they understood what we were there for, what our mission was. Obviously their mission was to protect our safety and protect our secrets from migrating to the Soviets, but I would argue an important part of their job too was to remember the prime reason we were there. So yeah, it was at times a not terribly cooperative relationship. I spent a lot of time arguing over who should pay the extra guards hired for my birthday party, and diplomatic security wanted to represent it as something that I had requested. I didn't request it at all. They're the ones who insisted that there be special guards hired and paid overtime to protect the bathrooms while this party was going on and to keep the Soviets from going to the Saint Patrick's Day dance that was just a few feet away in another area of the embassy compound. So we sent memos back and forth about who should pay for this for a long time. It was quite an episode.

Q: I served five years in Belgrade where probably the degree of observance was not as heavy, but it was still there. At a certain point you get to realize how little of what you do really, I mean our phone was tapped and I must say the Serb security service learned a great deal about organizing a Girl Scout troop by my wife in the international community. Most of what we do really is trying to communicate our ideas anyway.

THIELMANN: That's right. If you're having an affair with someone or you have some deep family problem, that's obviously the kind of thing that can be exploited by the other side. But, I don't think that if, as diplomatic security requests of us, any time you want to discuss finances you must be sure to do it in the bubble of the embassy. I think that's going a little bit overboard, and I noticed that, whenever we would want to schedule the bubble, it seemed like diplomatic security was always in it meeting. It was kind of hard to find time. So you have to use some commonsense in these things and realize that, as you say, most of your business is not sensitive at all and not really of use to the other side. Part of being a professional is understanding what is really sensitive and where you have to be careful, talking at home to your wife and others about it. So I think the reminders that many of our conversations were vulnerable to interception were good, but we weren't really given as much credit as we should have been for our professionalism and our ability to use commonsense.

Q: Well, was this security a result of the Sergeant Lonetree affair?

THIELMANN: Much of it was. That was the whole other element of our life in Moscow, which was much more difficult because of the events that started with Lonetree. The combination of the penetration of the Soviet embassy.

Q: You mean the American embassy.

THIELMANN: Yes, I'm sorry. The American embassy. The facts of this are still sort of murky. I don't really know to this day how much of it was penetrated, but clearly there had been some connivance between some of the Marines, and some Soviets did get to places in the American embassy they were not supposed to. So the consequence of that and the discovery that the new chancellery had been wired in a way that our technical experts had not anticipated or understood - those two things together left a very sort of heavy security cloud over the embassy and much more stringent demands on us than there would have been otherwise. Then to add to all of that, we had expelled Soviet diplomats from the mission in New York in great numbers a couple of years before I arrived there - at least one year before I arrived. So the Soviets then retaliated by pulling out all of their Soviet employees from our embassy, which meant for a while there we were the only embassy in the world that had no nationals from the host country working in the embassy. Because labor is very cheap in the Soviet Union and there was much to be done, of course there was a lot of work that all of a sudden American embassy members had to worry about. So the year before I arrived there were all kinds of horror stories about diplomats maintaining boilers and doing a lot of manual labor whether it was snow removal or other things that significantly kept them away from doing the jobs for which they had been sent to Moscow. By the time I had gotten there, the U.S. had started hiring contract Americans to come and do some of these critical tasks. For example we had a few American embassy drivers who had some minimal Russian language training. So they were considered secure and could take us around town unlike the previous Soviet drivers that we had to assume were working for the KGB. The problem here was there were very few, and so as a first secretary in the embassy, I always had to drive myself everywhere. This meant, if I had to make a demarche or go to a reception or to one of the institutes, I had to get out my CIA-made Moscow map and get in my Sputnik, my Russian car and drive on roads, which were usually not cleared during blizzards and had inadequate signage and bizarre Stalin-era traffic rules. This required a significant skill and caused stress. That of course only added to some of the other things like even cleaning the political section. We were the ones who had to vacuum, clean windows or whatever else needed cleaning. These private contractors couldn't bother doing something like that.

Q: We're talking about the working conditions. What was happening while you were there in the political-military section?

THIELMANN: Because of the inspections opened up under the INF treaty and some other ...

Q: This is prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that.

THIELMANN: That's right. When I arrived the INF treaty was already being implemented. It was a 1987 treaty. So the unit in the embassy that was interfacing with the Soviets was up and running. We had a port of entry at Ulan-Ude deep in Siberia, and there were American military personnel and other inspectors going in and out and a whole series of exchanges with the Soviet military, which were a new thing. I mentioned the Sixth Fleet visit to Sevastopol, homeport of the Soviet Black Sea fleet. There was a lot of interaction with members of the Soviet military that had not occurred before, and they would be receiving high level delegations in ways that they had not done before.

Q: Did you talk to the Soviet military too? I mean was this-

THIELMANN: I did some, but even though we had access, I probably wasn't able to exploit it quite as well because I was not in the military myself, not in the U.S. military. My Russian, while adequate was not at the level of fluency that would allow me to, let's say, easily develop a rapport with Soviet military that was already disconcerted by talking to American diplomats and most of whom had no English or no serviceable English. This would all be in Russian.

Q: Were you there when Admiral Crowe made a visit, I mean with the head of the Soviet military. I can't think of his name? He committed suicide.

THIELMANN: Sergei Akhromeyev.

Q: Yes.

THIELMANN: I don't think so. I'm not quite sure.

Q: I'm not sure when that happened.

THIELMANN: I'm drawing a blank on that right now. I was there, I mean, I was recalling the other day in connection with an op ed I was writing about Condi Rice. Before saying some not so nice things about Dr. Rice, I was recalling my accompanying her as a member of the NSC in 1990 to a meeting with Akhromeyev in the Kremlin on a Saturday, a one-on-one meeting, in which I was very impressed by Rice. She was speaking fluent Russian, dealing with Akhromeyev who was in uniform but at that time a special advisor to President Gorbachev. I remember being somewhat amazed that for this sixty-six year old World War Two veteran that he was doing business in Russian with an African American, a young African American woman talking about Soviet military policy. To me it was a credit to Condi Rice that she could establish that level of professional respect by someone representing a macho, racist cultural perspective.

Q: And generational.

THIELMANN: And generational. That's right. So I was very favorably impressed and increasingly less impressed with Condi Rice as the years have gone by.

Q: Did you go down to the Sevastopol visit?

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: How did that go?

THIELMANN: That was an incredible experience. It was incredible because it was not a Moscow event. It was in an enclosed military area. It was an area that had never seen - I mean most of these people down there had never seen - an American in their life. All of a sudden there were hundreds of sailors in white uniforms walking the streets. Then there was even General Greg Govan in a green uniform, a U.S. Army general. Govan was very fluent in Russian. He had a politician's manner. He would walk down the streets of Sevastopol surrounded by Russian kids, and he was clowning with them and joking with them, and it was an amazing spectacle. There were some organized exchanges, I think some sports contests, but just sort of Americans walking the streets and you'd hear these Sixth Fleet sailors saying this was the best port visit they'd ever had. I thought, "What? These guys who sail around Greece and Italy, and this is the best port visit." I think it was simply because the Soviets were so friendly, and it was such a novel experience. It was like a carnival atmosphere. Of course the U.S. naval attaché had to do a special video for the Sixth Fleet members reminding them about the no fraternization policy, and we heard at the time that there were hundreds of prostitutes coming down to the Crimea for the occasion. Then I did notice late at night as I was going back to my headquarters, there seemed to be at least a couple of American sailors who were walking alone with a woman on each arm. So I'm not sure if the policy was adhered to completely.

Q: Well, we've gone through that one before a number of times with complete lack of success.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: How did the events of 1989, because this was a cumulative thing, hit you from the vantage point of Moscow. I mean, was this sort of something, you understood that things were happening. I mean this was going to be a year that would shape the world more or less. Were you understanding the significance of it all?

THIELMANN: I think - and again my specific beat was arms control and not sort of what was going on in Eastern Europe - but I think as those unusual events occurred in Czechoslovakia and Germany, we certainly took note and this is very significant. But even then one or two months beforehand the breaching of the Berlin Wall came as a real shock. I remember getting a call from my wife in my office in our splendid isolation. Of course we didn't have CNN. Only the Soviet foreign ministry had CNN. My wife said something like the Berlin Wall is falling, but there were people crossing over on the wall and it was so electrifying. It was just an incredible piece of news, and then to see the way it played out from the Moscow point of view was also fascinating. I think that month after that was one of the most interesting of my career because for one thing the political officer who was responsible for following German-Soviet relations was gone. I was his backup. So I was the one who went around to the people in the Soviet foreign ministry who were responsible for relations with East Germany. I would go to events where the East German military attachés were invited to our defense attachés. There were good contacts with the Germany embassy, which I maintained. So to see that from all these different perspectives of people whose countries were not only intimately affected by all this but whose lives were intimately affected. I mean, East German diplomat or an East German general officer - I mean these people - their lives as they had known it were coming to an end. So it was an incredible perspective. Then also to realize, again no particular insight here, but to realize how worried the British and the French were about unification. I mean the three parties that seemed to be the most worried were our World War Two partners. The Soviet government, the British and the French were deeply worried about what this would mean. To get that sort of firsthand kind of emotional impression about that - this is something that I think was very important that we reported at the time, to get a sense of how the Soviet people were much less worried than the Soviet government about the consequences of unification. I mean one would have thought from an American perspective that this nation so traumatized by the German invasion and Nazi atrocities would rise as one in opposition and fear to seeing a unified Germany. But I think for us from a Moscow perspective it was much more the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the highest and oldest levels of the government - they were the ones who were panicky. My counterparts of my age and others who grew up in the post-World War Two era, they were not traumatized by a united Germany. A lot of these people had seen Germans too, post-World War Two Germans. The images of Germany as the evil empire were already significantly altered by the reality before the fall of the Wall.

Q: Leading up to this time was there any occasion where things were beginning to get wobbly to use a term. Were you, was there concern that maybe the Soviets would move into East Germany because it's really a matter of, will the Soviets move or won't they?

THIELMANN: I think there was definitely real concern about that. That's one of the things, which I think made everyone's pulse go up a little bit. There were huge numbers of Soviet troops in place. There was always the possibility of some unscripted incident occurring between the German population and Soviet troops. Looking back on it, that was something we were very lucky about. All of those hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers heavily armed, sitting surrounded by not so friendly populations and all these countries of Eastern Europe, and we managed to escape the whole thing with not only no incidents, but the Soviet Army withdrew on schedule. I mean that's an amazing thing. So I think we remained tense for quite a while after the fall of the wall.

Q: Well, were we looking at the Baltic States? Was this also a place that was a concern to us? I mean what was happening there?

THIELMANN: As I remember at the time we weren't quite as concerned about the Baltic States as we became later because the Soviet Union was still intact at that time. The Baltics were fairly well integrated into the Soviet Union - I mean integrated in a sense that an awful lot of Russians lived there. An awful lot of powerful Soviets would have vacation plans in the Baltic. Even at that time it was still hard to imagine the Baltics becoming independent countries when the Berlin Wall fell. I had a trip to Riga, Latvia in my last few months. I think this would have been the summer of 1990. A couple of things came out of that experience. One is just to be reminded again that Latvia was a very different kind of place than the Soviet Union. I mean the manicured lawns, the art deco architecture of the city, the overall Hanseatic League flavor of the city that remained after all this time was so palpable that I remember thinking at the time that with economic opening that whether this country was independent or not, this was going to be the kind of place which exploits the opening and takes advantage of new possibilities here much faster than other places. But to my memory I don't think even at the time I left in 1990, that we were looking at the Baltic States as soon to be independent.

Q: Was anybody within the embassy, political officers, economic officers, looking and saying, Kazakhstan and all the other stans and the Ukraine, might split up or not? Was anybody even contemplating that?

THIELMANN: We were certainly watching things at the time. There were some bloody protests in Georgia that were put down fairly brutally. There were movements in Kazakhstan, anti-nuclear testing movements. There were other things which were clearly creating serious problems for the Soviet center and control problems and manifestations of ethnic and cultural identities that we hadn't seen manifested in a long time. Of course we didn't know where that was going to end either. But again I'm trying to remember what was in our minds when I left in 1990, and I'm not sure then that we had any idea. I don't think a lot of us saw in the immediate future the break up of the Soviet Union. That was still kind of an unfeasible thought even after the Berlin Wall.

Q: Well, this was your first time there, wasn't it?

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: Did you also come away with a feeling that God this place doesn't work or did you feel that maybe economically it may not work, but it's certainly a strong, strongly held society through military force, political force, that sort of thing? How did you feel about it?

THIELMANN: I definitely had the feeling that this is a very dysfunctional country. This is sort of a pathetic place that even in the summertime can't come up with decent produce. What kind of a place is it that we bought our vegetables all year round at the Polish frozen food store or ordered things from Stockman's in Helsinki to be delivered on the train. I mean, a city of Moscow's size, a city where there were just starting to be some co-op restaurants where you could get some decent food. It was just starting. But it was still the kind of place where, when we went to Leningrad our first fall there in 1988, the city still had a lot of the decaying splendor of Catherine the Great who built most of the building that remained and the canals and everything, a great potential for beauty and a candy for the eye. But the whole city was just extremely hostile to tourists and had no place to sit and have a tea, no place to walk and get in out of the cold, just that sort of a feeling of just barren wasteland where all these millions of people are living. Then there was a kind of brutality of society. One of my favorite metaphors is right outside the U.S. embassy there was a ring road there with like seventeen lanes of traffic. They had the pedestrian stoplights timed so that people literally had to run across the street. To see like old babushkas with grocery bags in both hands walking who knows how many miles sort of slipping and sliding on the ice across the street before the completely unforgiving huge trucks would gun their way through this intersection. I thought, what a society this is! Then in spite of the fact that there were little pockets of great beauty from the past, there was the incredible ugliness of the housing stock, the decay of everything. I mean the average apartment building's door, the sort of decrepit condition of the entryways, all of this stuff was depressing to the spirit, and one got the feeling that hardly anything really works very well in this whole country.

Yet one remembers World War Two and the German underestimation of the determination of the Soviet people. One remember the space program. I mean they did beat us in putting a cosmonaut into orbit. They beat us in landing a robot on the moon, I think, or at least the far side of the moon. There were some aspects of the space race that the Soviets did first, and then of course they developed ICBM missiles before the United States and to this day have a record of reliability in their space launch vehicles which exceeds our own. So what a contrast and how hard it was to put the evidence of incompetence and lethargy and decay together with those genuine achievements in the society.

Q: Well, then Greg, it's probably a good place to stop. You left there when, in 1990?

THIELMANN: Summer of 1990.

Q: Where did you go?

THIELMANN: In 1990, I went to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) and became the division chief for strategic forces analysis, which in a lot of ways was a continuation of my time in the Soviet Union, because our main concern in that job was with the breakup of the Soviet Union - who had their finger on the nuclear trigger? It was of course Soviet strategic forces much more than Chinese or any nascent nuclear power that we worried about. That was our focus.

Q: So we'll pick this up in 1990 when you're off to INR.

Today is March 14th, 2005. Greg, how did you find the atmosphere of INR at that time. Were people listening? In general, what was your impression?

THIELMANN: I had a very favorable impression of INR, once I was inside it. I remember having had occasional contact with INR from the policy bureau perspective. I remember at the time they were obviously the keeper of secrets and had some interesting information, and they were capable people in it, but I did not really appreciate what a resource it was until I was inside it. Then I realized that for example the department had a chair in the intelligence community when the fifteen agencies or some subset of them got together to decide on a national assessment or some lower order of intelligence community proclamation. The State Department was there to put in its interpretation. One of the things that I had not appreciated until I got into INR was that there were very few entities in the intelligence community that did not have what I would call a kind of institutional bias which sort of skewed their assessments. All of the entities of the intelligence community have institutional biases I believe, including INR, but some of them seemed to pose a real threat to doing things that would, let's say, cast a dim light on their own agencies policy proclivities. If I can just put that another way, in the State Department it really did not matter if our analysis was critical of current U.S. foreign policy. This was little understood outside the INR, but certainly inside the building I quickly came to realize that the leadership of the intelligence bureau would fiercely protect the intellectual integrity of the line analysts. So an analyst didn't really have to worry about a judgement or a conclusion that would embarrass the others in the building or elsewhere in the U.S. government. The job was about as objective as one could imagine inside a government context. You obviously had to worry about people continuing to listen to you, and, if you got to be such a nag or if your tone was too snide and everything, you might turn off the kind of policy consumers that you wanted to pay attention to your product. But it was really refreshing to realize how academic in a sense INR was. You were expected to be on top of your product and to use evidence intelligently. But you were encouraged to use your judgement, make a leap when necessary as long as you made clear that this was a guess and that you reported accurately on what the confidence level was based on the evidence available. But it was quickly apparently to me that this was the kind of place where one could go home satisfied in the evening because you had done the best job you could given the evidence available to help policymakers understand what we knew from existing information. Much to my surprise I found out that, in many ways, that was more satisfying than being a cog in the policy machine and very often supporting policy with which you had serious reservations. Although broad of course as the implementer of policy you would also have a heavy responsibility to report what the foreigners thought of the policy or what the situation was in a foreign country. So being an objective reporter of facts had its own satisfaction. But I found that for me personally it was very satisfying to have a few layers between me as an analyst and the Secretary of State, the highest level consumer, and to be in that role of controlling the end result of your output much more than you did as a policy player.

Q: Well, one of the things we'll talk about if the interagency discussions and the biases there. One of the things, and you correct me if I'm wrong, was that in a way State had a certain exclusion from the budgetary process. I'm sure as regards the CIA and the Defense Department an awful lot of their analysis was based on how much money they'd get in order to collect this information, all sorts of equipment and paid sources and all that. Essentially we were doing it with what we had. So that nobody was saying well, if you think if you're knocking our product, what you're doing is you're cutting out a big slice of our budget.

THIELMANN: That's right. That's an important observation about the way things worked. The State Department's INR was on such a shoe string that, if one looked at the billions and billions being spent by the intelligence community, INR didn't even show up as a blip. INR's budget was basically the personnel costs of 220 people or something like that. Other elements of the intelligence community would have a big stake in people appreciating and valuing their own particular sources of intelligence information whether it was photographic imagery satellites, signals intelligence apparatus or human intelligence. All of these things were costly, and there would be a bias toward making whatever contribution your agency specialized in seem extremely important. The best example of that I think really is CIA and Human Intelligence. The CIA was the agency responsible for putting all of that evaluatory language on any kind of spy reporting. So any espionage would or should've been labeled in terms of what access that source had, what their record of reliability was and any kind of other information that, while protecting the name of the source, would allow the consumer to have some sense of what kind of information this was. From my point of view that was a really flawed part of the system because the CIA had an institutional interest in praising the value of its sources, and over the course of my career there were a number of times when I saw that those labels were not accurate. This is apart from the whole experience in Iraq where the Iraqi National Congress and others had obvious motives to slant the information. In that case even the CIA often said these sources were unreliable. But I'm talking about sources that the CIA kind of incorrectly labeled. As a foreign service officer abroad there were times when we caught this on information that we knew could not be true. Yet the CIA label is consistently reliable, and in at least one instance we found out it was someone who had left the job a year before he was claiming to still hold it. It was obvious because of what he was saying that this person could not be plugged in, and yet the CIA was not rigorous in their labeling. So to me that's an example of how the institutional interests of some of the other agencies would rob them of objective and hard-nosed assessments.

Q: Well, also too I think that, I'll make a comment on this while we're talking in general terms. INR probably is closer to "what does this mean for policy?" In other words it's really very close to action. Do we change our policy or not? Other ones are the accumulation of data, and the people who are on the intelligence side are not having to ask "what do we do about this tomorrow?" When INR is much closer to the policy development process. Does that make sense?

THIELMANN: That points to another institutional advantage we had over many others. We were so close to the consumers of information, literally minutes away, people down the corridor, a couple floors up, other people in the building. This was an advantage that hardly anyone else in the intelligence community had. DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) was mostly not in the Pentagon. They were in a separate building. CIA headquarters was on the other side of the river from most of their key intelligence consumers. Those agencies were so large that it would be very unusual for the producers of the intelligence and the analysts to really hear directly from the consumers the reactions to their product. So if there were any reactions at all, it was sort of filtered down through many layers. Their activity would be much more like thrown over the wall or shot in the dark as regards its utility. We had a better sense not because we were better analysts but because of the proximity and the constant contact with the policy consumers. We had a much better notion of what was important to them on a particular day or what was relevant given the overall policy context in terms of our analysis.

Q: Well, another thing and then we can move long. I think size also has a factor because the more people working over something, just means more layers. I'm told that the Jordanian desk in CIA has maybe ten people. The INR desk has one or two at most. You end up with the usual government thing of massaging something, editing it, and it doesn't come out. It gets neutered as it goes through the editing process of too many people going too far. It means that something can be wrong. But it also means, if you just have one person or two people working on something, it comes out as a little more stark, unedited as opposed to one that goes through the bureaucratic process of layers, that takes away all the bite, is safer but not perhaps as valid.

THIELMANN: There are a lot of different dimensions to the truism that small really is beautiful, and it is for intelligence analysis as well as a lot of other things. You've referred to some of the ways in which that's true. Certainly the layering is one way. Whatever ground truth you're starting with or keen insights of the line analysts, if you go through too many layers, you're going to weave around and get a product at the end which may be rather far from the original analytical insight. The CIA in particular had so many resources and such polished presenters in terms of wordsmiths and editors that you had a lot of very glossy products and some good writing in some of those products. But by the time it was ripe for publishing and presenting to others you may have strayed rather far from the ground truth that the line analyst originally developed. That just wasn't the case in INR. Usually the Secretary would be reading words of the line analyst. They were sometimes edited or massaged through an office director or the assistant secretary or deputy assistant secretary but not nearly as much as in the other agencies. So that was certainly one advantage. Another advantage of being small that I came to appreciate at INR was that it's almost impossible to lose sight of the forest because you can't be a specialist in all the trees. It's a very good thing that the U.S. government has specialists on the trees and on small detailed issues, but you have access to them as an INR analyst so you don't need to have that in-house. What you do need to have is someone who can put the various things together and describe the forest. I found that one aspect of that was that my office dealt with technical issues, weapons intelligence basically, political-military things, but it was always in the context of some complicated geo-political situation, about which INR experts were in frequent contact with us and also very nearby. If we were doing something on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, we would always be doing it with the Near East/South Asia office and the Iraq experts. I think that easy access and frequent interaction on a personal level with those people meant that, even though we didn't always agree with their spin on things, there was a close interaction and working relationship, which in the other larger agencies often became a very formal thing. I think it made us a little bit more nimble and more integrated in our end product than some of the other agencies. Also it had an advantage from a supervisory aspect. The assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretaries knew the people whose product they were editing. They knew the eccentricities of the analysts. They knew who was green and who was mature, who was very careful and precise about language and who wasn't. They could make compensations. I just can't imagine in the larger agencies when you got to something that was going to be published in the National Intelligence Daily or whatever that the editors personally knew the people who were writing the product. In this brief conversation we're talking about three different ways that small size can be an advantage. There are obviously also disadvantages. If one analyst gets sick, INR is in trouble. Usually there is one person who can fill in, but that one person has a lot of other responsibilities. So there are obviously advantages and disadvantages, but when it comes to integrated analysis, self confidence, and fidelity to the evidence, I think it's hard to beat the size that INR had.

Q: Who was the head of INR at the time?

THIELMANN: Stapleton Roy was the head. Well, let me go back. Douglas Mulholland was head of INR when I came in 1990. This was someone who had been part of the small Treasury Department intelligence operation under President Bush, I think. So he came over to the State Department. In my second iteration in INR it was Stapleton Roy who had been ambassador to China and Indonesia. And Phyllis Oakley. They were basically, Phyllis Oakley, Stapleton Roy and then Carl Ford, those were all people I served under.

Q: Well, the first time 1990 to when were you in INR?

THIELMANN: 1990 to 1993, I extended one year.

Let me just throw in one other head of INR toward the end of my first tour there. Toby Gati, G-A-T-I, became assistant secretary so I had a very brief period with her. It was mostly Mulholland but then Toby Gati.

Q: How did you find Mulholland?

THIELMANN: Mulholland was a competent person, a nice person. I don't think he'll be in the list of INR greats. He was not a product of the foreign service or the State Department culture, but he was a gentleman and competent so people had no real complaints. If there were any secret desires it would to have had a more feisty or stronger voice maybe in the interagency-

Q: Now coming from Treasury was he a sort of Baker confidante.

THIELMANN: Yes, he was. Yes, he was.

Q: So did you feel that you had-

THIELMANN: We felt that we were plugged into the Secretary because of that association, and that's always important for the analyst to feel that they have an entrée into the Secretary's office.

Q: Well, let's talk now about 1990 to '93 and your job was on the military side. I mean this had to be a fascinating time because we're talking about the rapid demise of the Soviet Union, all sorts of weapons up for grabs and everything else. Talk about your job.

THIELMANN: I was acting division chief because I didn't have the foreign service rank that fitted the position at the time. That job had been one of the most important in INR because it was trying to monitor and analyze Soviet strategic forces, which obviously were the large existential threat to the United States. It was also the office that worried about providing the relevant intelligence on that subject which would be used by those negotiating the strategic offensive arms treaties, the SALT treaties and then the START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) treaties. So that was kind of the traditional main focus of the job, worrying about Chinese forces obviously and other countries that had nuclear weapons as well. It was overwhelmingly Soviet military power. Once the Soviet Union fell, one little dimension of the job really bloomed. The traditional efforts to look at the reliability of the command and control structures and how operationally orders to attack would've been conveyed to the missile forces. All of that which was before a very small subset of the job became much more important as the Soviet Union broke up into a number of different states including Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, each one of which hosted significant numbers of Soviet strategic forces. So that first tour in INR corresponded with this very delicate period of the U.S. working very hard in a number of ways to try to insure that these four countries with nuclear weapons transitioned to only one country with nuclear weapons. Or to put it another way, the Soviet control over the nuclear weapons would morph into a Russian control over nuclear weapons and Minsk, Kiev and Alma-Ata did not end up having their own nuclear forces bequeathed to them because of the breakup. It was particularly sensitive in the case of Ukraine because Ukraine more than the others had some of the largest and most sophisticated missile assembly plants, had a lot of indigenous expertise on how to make both the delivery vehicles and also the nuclear weapons.

So the Ukrainians had some real choices for keeping some of those nuclear weapons. What actually would have happened if they had continued along that path or if they had seriously pursued that path, we don't know. Obviously the Russians were very intent on them not having those options, but it was a real concern. There were a number of scenarios that were seriously considered that would have featured war between Ukraine and Russia. Most of those scenarios I think we thought were unrealistic, but that they were even seriously discussed showed what a real crisis this was and what a delicate period of time it was.

Q: Well, in a sort of peculiar way we and the Russians were both on the same side, weren't we?

THIELMANN: It was a very curious form of cooperation because we shared an interest with the Russians in ensuring that Russia maintained control over all those nuclear forces. In some respects we rooted for the safe transit of nuclear weapons from these other countries back to Russia so they could then be put online aimed at the United States. There was certainly some irony in that, but it was considered a far worse outcome if we had new independent centers of power that might also have targeted their weapons at the United States. So part of the irony also was that, as much as we wanted Russia to maintain control of the weapons, we genuinely wanted Ukraine to evolve in a western direction and to reanimate some of the traditions that were really alive in Ukraine as a European country. It was much more oriented toward the U.S. than the more Asian-oriented heartland of the Soviet Union was. So we were trying to encourage that. We were trying to get Ukraine to see itself as a country that would be benefited much more by pursuing a German or a Japanese model of obviously being capable of having nuclear weapons but, by pursuing a non-nuclear path, could find a better way to reintegrate itself into the western economy.

Q: Well, how did you find dealing with particularly the Defense Intelligence Agency and the CIA on this particular issue? I mean were there any problems or divergences?

THIELMANN: There were certainly some divergences and, while my memory is not terribly sharp on this, I think in general I would like to say we were a little bit more sophisticated in the scenarios that we used. Some of those probably from the Defense Department side of things put more credence in the outbreak of war between Ukraine and, Russia, and when we thought through those scenarios, it just seemed extremely unlikely. I mean for one thing there were so many Russians living in Ukraine. The eastern part of Ukraine was basically ethnic Russian. It just got kind of incredible to think about any scenario in which you would have one of these countries lobbying nuclear weapons at another. So I think, to put it neutrally, it was because we were closer to a more sophisticated analysis of the internal dynamics of Soviet society and the new emerging societies that we weighed the likelihood of those scenarios a little bit differently. One of the other things that I remember about this era is that we received some very valuable human intelligence from some of our foreign allies. Without going into too much detail, I was impressed at the quality of information of one of our special partners in intelligence. They had presumably at much lower cost were providing better human intelligence, more critical useful human intelligence than our own U.S. agencies.

Q: Were you concerned about rogue scientists in the Ukraine or elsewhere exporting their knowledge of nuclear things to people such as Iran, Iraq and all that?

THIELMANN: That was definitely a constant concern. Even in INR where we had such limited resources, we tried to start keeping track of certain individuals about which there was intelligence. We tried to stay plugged into the other agencies who had the resources to look closely at this because this was seen by almost everyone in the intelligence community as a source of concern that in the end would be much greater than the prospect of Ukraine developing independent nuclear forces. The collapse of the Soviet economy and all those incentives and privileges and everything else that made life for weapons scientists about as good as it could be in a Soviet context led to people not getting paid month after month. The temptations became very great even though in that respect I think those who were not as familiar with the Soviet society maybe saw the temptations as being greater by putting ourselves in their shoes. I think there was for those who were not as close to the way the Soviet Union actually operated, it was just easy to imagine hundreds of thousands of scientists just contracting out to Libya or other countries.

Q: Yes, I mean when one looks at it, one thinks about oneself.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: If all of a sudden the State Department stopped paying me my pension, my God what would I do?

THIELMANN: That's right.

Q: But I guess they had support systems and other things.

THIELMANN: They had support systems and sort of a deep nationalism so that a lot of Soviet scientists would not be particularly comfortable working for the Iraqis or the Libyans, or the North Koreans or anyone else. I say that even in the knowledge that there were Russians and Ukrainians who did just that. The magnitude of the problem was probably not what we might think putting ourselves in their shoes. It was certainly a serious enough concern that we needed to inform the policy people who could actually do something to mitigate that danger and did in fact by aiding some of the labs and the weapons manufacturing facilities to give them another alternative at home for using some of their skills.

Q: What about the Soviet Black Sea fleet because it was a pretty sophisticated set of ships and all that including nuclear missiles. The problem was where did it belong?

THIELMANN: That was another incredible development that occurred as a result of the breakup. Sevastopol, the headquarters of the Soviet Black Sea fleet, was a very Russian city. It was extremely important in the Russian military context. It had this sort of glorious World War Two history as a heroic defense against the Nazi invasion. It was about as rock solid as any Russian city could be, and yet all of a sudden it found itself in the Ukraine. So all those Russian war ships and the Russian personnel were all of a sudden in another country that had its own designs on Russian ships. So that was another messy problem and of course one of the serious irritants in the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. Having been to Sevastopol while in the embassy in Moscow and having seen that firsthand, it was another way in which I suppose I benefited from having been a foreign service officer and our office benefited a bit from that kind of perspective. But we also understood that in terms of strategic forces, the Black Sea fleet was fading in significance, and it almost was almost irrelevant in terms of the strategic impact of the Russian Navy. I mean, it was all the Northern fleet and the Pacific fleet. That's where their sea-based nuclear deterrent was based. So the Black Sea fleet and those military capabilities, during the height of the Cold War had been exaggerated by the U.S. partly because it was good for raising funding. But no one I think ever really saw the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean as being able to last very long if there were actually a war. So I think the Black Sea fleet in that conflict with Ukraine was of great significance in political terms but less so in military terms.

Q: With naval intelligence and all looking at the Black Sea fleet, did the defense people have a sort of a different view? Because as you say it's pretty obvious it's a write off. But in order to maintain enough ships in our Navy you've got to have a threat.

THIELMANN: Yes, I think it's pretty hard to ignore that dynamic entirely. This isn't to cast aspersions on the integrity of defense analysts or the Navy. But there's just a natural interest in looking at the order of battle of Russian ships and arguing that we had to have a comparable order of battle matching them cruiser for cruiser ignoring all these things like the bases that ring the Mediterranean with fixed wing aircraft that can attack those ships. It was just a horribly hostile environment for the Soviet Navy in the best of days to operate. I mean they could use port facilities in Syria or Egypt perhaps but-

Q: And get out of the Basra, exactly.

THIELMANN: I mean so vulnerable to being bottled up. I mean I would say that the U.S. Navy didn't have an institutional interest in presenting to the public the full dimensions of the Russian problems - what the Soviet problems would be and what the U.S. problems would be if there were an actual conflict.

Q: While you were there, did you see any crisis coming up regarding missile control in this Soviet-Russian-Ukraine context during this '90-'93 period.

THIELMANN: There were some very delicate moments in which we analyzed what the Ukrainian options would be if they really wanted to seize control of forces, and it wasn't evident that the Russians could keep them from doing it if they really chose to. There were elements in the Ukrainian political spectrum that were arguing for that course of action. So it wasn't just a theoretical excursion of Western analysts. There were real Ukrainians who wanted to do that. I think my memory is that we were a little less alarmist about the prospects of that happening than some in other agencies. We recognized the danger and certainly highlighted it as a danger and treated it as an analytical priority because of the consequences, but we were a little less pessimistic about whether or not it would happen than were some in the other agencies.

Q: Was looking at the Israeli nuclear force sort of a no no at that time? I mean in other words for domestic political reasons, you just didn't talk about it.

THIELMANN: This was one of those areas in which it seemed to me that the long arm of the policy world stretched into the intelligence world. I remember from that period in INR working on national intelligence estimates, looking fifteen years out at the nuclear powers, I was somewhat amazed at the invisibility in these top-secret intelligence community surveys of world nuclear weapons. It was almost like the Israelis didn't exist. At that point it was really a very bizarre thing because the Indians and Pakistanis didn't have nuclear weapons at that point. We had the five MPT nuclear powers that existed in 1968 and the Israelis. The Israelis had a very significant nuclear capability with sophisticated delivery systems that could for example allow them to attack Ukraine or parts of Russia and a kind of nuclear force that in size was kind of approaching the British and French nuclear forces. Yet it seemed to be politically incorrect to say anything in these top-secret internal documents about Israeli nuclear capabilities. I remember protesting at analytical sessions and trying to push them to a more objective academic look at the issue not colored by the fact that the Israelis had their policy of ambiguity and did not want to admit that they had nuclear capability. I said that's no reason for us not to describe it as we know it. I mean whatever policy the U.S. wants to take in terms of subscribing to Israeli ambiguity we should not be kidding ourselves about the objective realities.

Q: Well, did you feel that this was self-censorship on the part of the intelligence community of saying, oh God if we do this it's sure to leak and it's sure to bring all hell on the Israeli lobby and Friends of Israel will be all over us? In other words this was not somebody from up above doing it. Where did you feel it was coming from?

THIELMANN: I really felt it was self-censorship. Now I wasn't maybe high enough in the hierarchy. Maybe it was more direct than that, but I think it was political savvy - senior intelligence officials thinking this is a problem we don't want to have. We don't want the pro-Israeli lobby coming down hard on the U.S. government because of something that we did here so let's just not talk about it.

Q: Yes. It really is amazing. Well, what about China? How did we view China at that time, '90 to '93?

THIELMANN: What I remember about that era is that it was so difficult for the intelligence community to not use our own model of strategic forces development in thinking about the Chinese. So what I remember from that era was how strong the other agencies pushed in their analytical product for the assumption that China would have many more strategic nuclear weapons within some number of years, that they would have multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles on each of those missiles and that they would be telling policymakers the Chinese are basically going to take off. One of the reasons I remember that so strongly was because I was uncomfortable at the time since we had seen a history of the Chinese being very modest in their nuclear weapons programs. I mean they acquired nuclear weapons, and then they increased their capabilities at a very slow rate. It was nothing like either the U.S. or the Soviet development pattern - kind of exponential increases in warheads. I remember at the time feeling that I didn't really have enough time as an analyst of Chinese strategic forces to really pound the table too hard on this issue. I remember being skeptical, but these memories came back to me several years later when I reentered the picture and found that lo and behold the Chinese hadn't done any of those things that the majority of the intelligence community seemed comfortable in predicting. But they were still at that same low level of strategic missiles that could threaten the United States.

Q: Well, as you are looking at this, did you find the normal military assumption of a worst case scenario. You can't say the United States will roll over the Iraqi Army in a matter of days practically. You have to say well, maybe such and such, whatever it is. It's always, you have to plan for the worst case. Was this coming through in the what you are getting out of the analysis people?

THIELMANN: I think that's certainly part of it, and I'm not as hard as some on the worst case analytical predisposition of the Pentagon. I mean I call it responsible prudent worst case analysis.

Q: I agree.

THIELMANN: But that's what they need to do. But that didn't mean that we had to do that. The way I would put it, our obligation in advising the senior State Department leadership was to present them with our best estimate of what was likely to happen and not what could in the worst circumstances happen. I mean we can identify that and encourage people not to forget that this most likely course could be wrong and that it could be even worse than that. But that shouldn't be our headline on intelligence products because that's very misleading. If you end up writing products that use screaming headlines and saying this country could do this when that's a ten percent probability, you've fundamentally mislead the Congress and the senior leadership because they don't read that as being something that's very unlikely. So to me that's the real difference. You do need to look at the worst case, but you also need to have perspective properly presented to the policy makers. So I think what was happening here was a reflection of the natural and understandable instincts of the military side of the intelligence community. But then the irresponsible senior intelligence officials who come up with the community products giving it more weight than it deserves and the kind of presentations that are made. I would also say even for those who understandably should look at the worst case, I don't think there was due deference to what the track record was of China even in that 1990 to 1993 interval. They should've drawn some conclusions from how China had behaved in the 1980s instead of just saying well, of course China could technologically develop independently targeted reentry vehicles. In order to provide the sort of U.S. level of protection of their modest force, there is an imperative they increase the number of warheads. I mean that's the way we would think. We would think you assume the worst of the other side so you have to make sure that you can survive an attack that the other side makes against you. The Chinese obviously didn't think that way because their forces in the early 1990s and certainly in later 1990s were getting perilously vulnerable to a first strike U.S. attack. But the Chinese weren't thinking the way we were about that because they were obviously willing to accept that kind of vulnerability.

Q: What about the powers in this time period of North Korea, India, Pakistan? Was this part of your portfolio?

THIELMANN: It's interesting in terms of portfolio our office in INR was still treating this as something the proliferation division looked at and not the strategic forces division. I was already a little uncomfortable with that because it's such an artificial distinction really. I mean the putative strategic powers or the countries that were emerging nuclear powers or had an apparent intent to continue pursuing that at least had to be something we were looking at because the expertise and the criteria of maintaining strategic forces and command and control and all those things were something that was in the realm of the strategic forces analyst not so much in the realm of those who were worrying about whether this missile production equipment was being transferred or not or range testing or range radars for testing missiles in flight. I mean ultimately there was a merger toward the end of the period of the missile proliferation into the strategic forces, which kind of took care of the problem for me anyway. That was a logical development. But in 1990 to 1993 it was still on the horizon. We knew that India and Pakistan were working on this, but we didn't know in either case for sure that they had made a decision to actually go forward. I'm going to have to take a break.

Q: Yes. Were there any either incidents, crises, amusing things or anything like that happening during this particular time?

THIELMANN: I don't think so. I mean I'm sure there were, but I'm drawing a blank at the moment on whether other developments-. One of the things that struck me about the particular office that I served in was we had a very able office director named Gary Dietrich, and he had a deputy named Alan Locke who I then went to work for later. It was a real sense that this particular office was one of the hardest working and well managed in the bureau. That made an impression on me because it was very easy to compare offices in a small bureau. You would see the office directors represented at morning meetings, and so it was very impressive in terms of the way the office was managed and the recruitment of personnel and everything. I was impressed with this particular office.

Q: Well, did you ever feel that you were outmanned, outgunned or something at the joint meetings with particularly Defense and CIA?

THIELMANN: Yes, we always felt that one of the particular frustrations in INR, and I experience this much more when I became office director, was it always seemed like we were just on the verge of getting the minimum number of people. We could never quite get there. There was always some critical shortage in the office, some critical issue that you had to cover that for one reason or another you just couldn't get people on board. Either security was taking a long time or veteran's preference indicated that you had to choose someone that you didn't want to choose or INR seemed to be always at its personnel limit. It was always a real juggling act to bring someone else onboard, and then there would be freezes and everything. So personnel was a constant problem and the State Department had not been particularly generous over the years either. When it took the various cuts that it experienced over those decades, it was always tempting to shave a few more analysts off of INR.

Q: Of course this is a particularly bad time.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: Personnel wise throughout the State Department.

THIELMANN: Yes. That's right.

Q: Throughout the government but-

THIELMANN: That's right.

Q: But the State Department was taking quite a hit. There just wasn't the pressure from above. Baker was not very interested.

THIELMANN: Yes, that's putting it mildly. I mean, we all noticed it at the time. This gets back to that exact time, 1993, that the Soviet Union broke up, and Baker gained points on the Hill by saying well, we can eat all those cuts. We can establish fourteen new embassies, and we don't need more people for those fourteen new embassies. It was an absurd statement and we paid for it in a terrible way.

Q: Well, then in '93, you got a new administration coming in, the Clinton administration. What did you do?

THIELMANN: Well, that was when Toby Gati came to INR. But what I did in 1993 was to go to the European bureau and get a job as officer in charge of German affairs. I don't know if the position still exists or not. But it was an unusual position in that not very many country desk jobs involved supervision of only one country. As officer in charge of German affairs, I would supervise two more junior officers who worked full-time on West German (FRG) affairs. This was in an office that had previously dealt with all those esoterical issues like Berlin matters but also had the East German (GDR) account and Austria and Switzerland. Then there was also an economics officer who dealt with all of those countries. So in one sense I didn't really supervise all the people who were working on the German issues; the economic operation was separate. The office director and the deputy office director were themselves sometimes at least eighty percent focused on German affairs issues, but it was a job that I liked a lot because at least I had license to concern myself with anything having to do with Germany. It was one of those occasions for trying to orchestrate the reporting out of what was still a significant number of constituent posts for one country. It was in a period of time where some of the new posts, like Leipzig, was very important for trying to keep track of what was happening in this new piece of Germany that had obviously a very different political culture than in the past.

Q: You were doing this in '93 to when?

THIELMANN: '93 to '95.

Q: In '93 when you took over, was Germany united by this time or what was happening?

THIELMANN: By that time Germany was united, and I'm trying to remember when the - can't even remember what it was called, the Four Plus, the Four Plus Two or whatever - we had these very sensitive negotiations to lay out the reunification or unification of the two Germanys. By the time I got there, it had all happened. I think that there were still some Russian soldiers on their way out. I'm not quite remembering the last withdrawal although I do remember that the Russians kept to the schedule, which was impressive. They got everyone out at the time they were supposed to have them out. But what was happening was of so much interest at the time. There was one Germany. There were these new German provinces in what had been East Germany like Saxony. When I say new, of course they were in many cases returning to a very old political identity, particularly in the case of Saxony. There was Saxony-Anhalt and Pomerania and Brandenburg and so forth. This was just really fascinating for anyone with a background in German affairs to see those old identities and the old way of doing things and even where German companies would traditionally be headquartered. Would the Dresdner Bank go back to Dresden for example? There were all those banks that had moved to Frankfurt and then had the option of locating in Berlin or one of the other places. So seeing how Germany was changing, seeing how the country would share the enormous costs of bringing East Germany and East German infrastructure into the very modern West German orbit was really fascinating as was seeing where the fissures in the society were, the so called Wall that the East Germans still had in the head. The resentment of East Germans toward the sense of superiority the West Germans had and what we would've seen in our post civil war context as carpetbaggers coming from one side to exploit opportunities on the other were also visible.

Q: When you took it over, did you feel that we were, you might say, overly optimistic about the integration of Germany or did you realize what a tough nut it was going to be. Because as we speak in 2005 there's a real divide still there. It hasn't moved together the way that at least I would've thought it would.

THIELMANN: I'm trying to recall the way we thought about at the time. I think some people thought that Chancellor Kohl was too optimistic about it, and of course, he was. Historically speaking, he used certain images about the East German landscape blooming. Some of the entrenched problems of having a whole generation of Germans raised in the socialist paradise model of low incentives to work and inefficiency and all those things were much harder to fix really than things like the transportation and communications infrastructure, which really was fixed in a spectacular way. People have commented that East Germany now has a more modern infrastructure than West Germany does because so much of it is new. I mean that was enormously expensive, and it took years to work on. But you can point to concrete accomplishments there. If you look at what has happened to the human potential and the problem of high unemployment in large sections of Eastern Germany, it's been a real chronic problem and something that unification has not been terribly successful in achieving. So I think that the U.S. State Department's Germany analysts saw very realistically some of the problems that would lie ahead for Germany. I think in some ways the real Germany experts were probably pleasantly surprised at how successful some aspects of the unification were. I mean the Germans and their Germanic way were very thorough with a lot of the things that had to be done. There was in some senses even more of a German identity that was successfully appealed to than some people might have appreciated. So I think the kind of deep problems were foreseen by the U.S.-Germany experts, and if anything there was some pleasant surprise about how successful some aspects of unification went. But it was very important to have people on the ground and in contact with the new political elements and particularly important to have those who actually bridged that chain, the people who served in Germany in the late 1980s and who knew a lot of the protesters and everything.

Q: How did we see politics in Germany at that time, as regards their impact on American policies and interests?

THIELMANN: Well, what I remember most distinctly at the time was the great satisfaction in seeing Germany united. I think I may have mentioned this previously but from a Moscow perspective it was seeing the nervousness felt by France and Britain about unification, and the United States had none of those concerns about a looming Germany changing the power relationship. What was clearly different was the adjustment to a Germany that did not have to accept basically anything that the U.S. security required for existential reasons. Some in the U.S., and I think especially in the Pentagon were slow to appreciate the fact that a united Germany didn't have to accept sort of low flying jet aircraft or tanks churning up their farmer's fields anymore now that the threat was receding rapidly. With an independent Poland and everything, the Germans were just in a very different situation. The United States in my opinion wasn't as adept as it should have been in making an adjustment in our own minds about Germany. We should have more rapidly adjusted our own dealings with them and backed off from the somewhat imperious ways that we demanded cooperation from the Germans.

Q: Were we seeing a new German in its role in Europe now? I mean, did we see a Germany that was beginning to shuck off the almost subservient guilt of World War Two and say, yeah, we're a big powerful country and we have our own interests?

THIELMANN: I think there was a new Germany emerging, and of course one of those endlessly fascinating aspects of German affairs was to try to say how much is it new and how much is it old. It doesn't lend itself to easy generalizations. I think the roots of the Federal Republic of Germany that emerged after World War Two are very deep. The new unified Germany is a victory for that Western German model. There's no kind of halfway point between East and West Germany. I mean the West took over. We wouldn't usually say it that bluntly, but that's what happened. There are some negative consequences of that too in terms of alienation of some of the Eastern Germans. But I think it's very solidly rooted in the kind of western values that we always wanted Germany to have. Of course it's ironic that the U.S. has taken to complaining about the Germans not being willing to have a large enough military and being too reluctant to go abroad in search of dragons to slay. There is terrible irony in that. So there's obviously some impatience on our part still for Germany not assuming it's full weight as an international actor. But there's also irritation on our part of Germany defining its own interests in any way on any occasion as being different from our own. So it's a little bit hard for us to have it both ways. I mean, what kind of Germany do we want after all?

But the combination of the German unification and the biological factor of the older generations dying off and Germany being run basically by people who don't have a memory of the war years, and increasingly don't even have a memory of the early post war years of hardship are creating a very different Germany than the previous one. It's manifested in such simple things as watching the Germans at a World Soccer Cup, seeing Germans waving flags or painting their face in the German colors. It's really extraordinary for people who have been German watchers in the post-World War Two era. As harmless and innocuous as those manifestations of nationalism are, the Germans just didn't do it. You'd be hard pressed to find a flag flying anywhere in Germany when I first went there in 1969.

So I see this as Germany becoming a normal country. I think it is most of the way to becoming a normal country, which doesn't mean Germany is avoiding the issue of war guilt. I mean Germany is still paying large sums of compensation for victims of the Nazi dictatorship even though, of course, Germany is often involved in action to limit the amount of payments it has to make. It often finds itself in the role of heavy in those arguments. But, if one takes any kind of a comparative look between Germany and Japan, Germany has dealt with its war guilt and Japan has not fully done so. East Germany has not fully dealt with its war guilt, but that's the consequence of the Communist leadership always blaming it all on the West Germans and saying that they, as the inheritors of the communist resistance, had nothing whatsoever to do with it. But then it became of course no accident that the skinheads and the fascists were much more prevalent in East Germany than West Germany, and in some sense the real inheritors of Nazi fascism are, have their roots in the impoverished part of East Germany.

Q: Was the role of France and Germany part of your portfolio? I mean there was a lot of effort on the part of the leaders of the two countries to create a solid political blockage. Did that come up?

THIELMANN: It came up. I guess I first had a full appreciation of that when I served in Germany in the '80s. The enormous contribution of the real sea change that was achieved originally in the coal and steel community after World War Two brought them into the same economic basket. But also those enormously successful and large-scale exchange programs that brought young Germans and Frenchmen together in the 1950s really fundamentally changed that long standing, kind of instinctive animus between Germans and French. I really think that even though during this period, 1993 to 1995, we saw a fair degree of cooperation and good relations between Germany and France. We're only now years later really seeing the full implications of the German and French working together. We see it again and again in diplomatic reactions or initiatives in which Paris and Berlin are part of the same position often with the United States in some other position.

Q: I guess you weren't dealing with the economic policy or maybe you were as we were moving towards the world trade organization. Did that come across your desk?

THIELMANN: That was really more in the area dealt with by the economic officer on the desk. So I noted, tried to cooperate in, but wasn't directly responsible for that part.

Q: Did you see Germany extending itself into the east. I mean this is when Germany was unified. One of the thoughts was "oh my God, they will take over Eastern Europe basically economically and eventually sort of politically because they're well positioned compared to the rest of the west and also have the power." Is this something you were looking at and concerned about?

THIELMANN: Yes, it was something we were looking at. I think we had lesser concern in a way. To a certain extent, if one has a notion of a limited power pie, then German inroads into Eastern Europe were in competition with U.S. power and control over what was happening in Eastern Europe. In fact in the economic world that was very much often the case. It was either German investments and ownership or American investments and ownership in some of the countries of Eastern Europe. But I was really struck during my time on the Germany desk by the vitality and the relevance of this notion of central European culture. It was something that ironically the State Department organization kind of reflected even in the depths of the Cold War when you had the Communist part of Europe being dealt with in one bureau or one side of a very sharp bureaucratic division except for East Germany, which was still part of Central European Affairs and dealt with by all those people who were dealing with NATO affairs. It was kind of an odd little artifact of that Central European notion. But John Kornblum, who had such an important role in handling Germany in the State Department from policy planning staff, from the European bureau, from Brussels and eventually as ambassador in Germany, always spoke about Central European identity as rooted in its historical knowledge. He always pointed out that this Central European identity meant that Czechs and Slovaks and Hungarians and to a certain extent even Poles saw a German cultural center there that extended from the business community into the cultural realm in so many ways after the Cold War ended and Europe was united. The Czechs and the Hungarians were enormously influenced by the Germans, and the Germans had a lot of influence in these other places they once had in German history. So a lot of that shift continued, and, of course, it also extends to Russia and a historic German commitment to and involvement in Russia that the U.S. really doesn't appreciate. I mean the Germans always had a much longer-range view of Russia and I think Americans tend to think of the German-Russian relationship as the terrible conflict between Nazism and Communism, a very brutal German occupation, the holocaust. They forget about the centuries old settlement of Germans under Catherine the Great, the significant German industrial investments in Russia, and even the German or Prussian soldiers that fought under the czars in the Napoleonic era. All of that should not be exaggerated, but it's all there and helps account for a much deeper German-Russian relationship than an American-Russian relationship. I noticed even as recently as a couple of days ago in the Washington Post's Jim Hoagland talking about Germany as just a spokesman for the West or the United States in dealing with the Russians, which really doesn't capture the relationship that I see as the Germans having a very distinct interest in relations with Russia that doesn't correspond completely with the U.S. interests and relations with the Russians. I mean it was manifested earlier in the Soviet era when they had a gas pipeline into Germany, and the U.S. had a fit and said this is unacceptable. The Germans had a different point of view about that. There really is a different relationship. Even though there is clearly direct economic competition in terms of Eastern European markets and other things, I see this as being a friendly competition. I don't feel a sense of alarm about German influence in Eastern Europe and Russia, because I think for the most part their political values are our own values as well.

Q: Well, was there any concern at this time about I'd say the diminution of American interests in Germany? It was no longer the frontline state and things were happening all over. A considerable number of American males myself included served in Germany as soldiers. All of a sudden this is beginning to dissipate, and I was wondering whether Germany was so much faded on our radar. Was this-

THIELMANN: That was very much a concern during my era on the Germany desk because we were seeing the departure of half of the soldiers that were stationed in Germany going to fight in the Gulf-

Q: And then left.

THIELMANN: And then they went home rather than going back to Germany. They just went home so that the troop strength was cut in half, and, of course, now it's even less, and with Rumsfeld talking about old Europe and looking lustily at Eastern Europe you have a different situation. But our concern then was exactly what you were talking about. You had more than one generation of Americans that had intimate contact with the Germans. They had lived in their midst. They had mixed with them. A whole lot of marriages resulted from that contact. There were very big exchange programs with Germany, and then with the ending of the Cold War there was a sense that it had become passé and we had new frontiers to explore. There was a real concern in the State Department about this loss of initiative and priority and what were we going to do to replace that automatic massive contact between our two cultures that resulted from our heavy military investment in Germany. There were various things that were conceived and programs implemented to try to move into a new era without losing the kind of connectivity we had. But I think the concern was real and continues to this day.

Q: Yes, I have a feeling that not as many people are taking German, and if you're going on vacation, Germany is pretty far down the list.

THIELMANN: That's right. That's right.

Q: There's France, Spain, Italy, Britain or a cruise in the Baltics or something, but Germany is pretty far down the list. So the contact is lessening in a way.

THIELMANN: That's right. I think it's less of a concern. There's still plenty of German contact with the United States partly because of the relationship between the Euro and the dollar. I mean the U.S. is still a very popular tourist destination. I mean there are enormous number of Germans in Florida and so forth. Germans are still or even more capable in English than they ever were. So that's not so much a problem. But it's the Americans being exposed to Germany and learning German and traveling in Germany. That's the tough one. We were working hard during that period on it and I think are still working on it now. I should also mention that that was the period when Richard Holbrooke was first ambassador to Germany, and then he came back to become head of the European bureau. So I saw Holbrooke from both perspectives as sort of our man in Germany and then back as boss.

Q: What was your impression of Holbrooke in this particular-

THIELMANN: Holbrooke was very capable and impressive in terms of his energy level, his ability to work the system and this a bit of a reluctant witness because I thought he had some serious character flaws. But I found myself so frequently in agreement with his policy instincts and his sense of where U.S. interests lay. So that's my reluctant witness, but he was such an egomaniac. He had such non-admirable character traits from my perspective that it was hard for me to see him as a model senior diplomat nor someone that I would be happy to see as Secretary of State.

Q: While you were there, what was the situation in former Yugoslavia? I mean, Germany played a rather crucial role with Genscher but was that during your time?

THIELMANN: I think I missed the really critical period when Germany from retrospect jumped the gun and recognized the various component parts of Yugoslavia and at least from what I've heard from those who know the area much better than I kind of precipitated some of the crises.

Q: It was a significant move.

THIELMANN: Yes, so I think that Germany had played a role there that it should not be particularly proud of. But in some respects it tried to make up for it later by committing significant forces to the very unpleasant and thankless task of creating order and some foundation for the birth of democracy and the rule of law there.

Q: Well, were there any particular events or something that particularly sticks in your mind during this '93 to '95 period?

THIELMANN: There were a lot of little anecdotes. I'll just mention a couple. One is in terms of interesting State Department dynamics. There was a secretary in the office that was not performing adequately, and I remember, when I first came in the office, an attempt to remove her from a position had been underway for almost two years. During the time I was in the office, she was finally separated for reasons of non-performance. But I looked back on it as being an extraordinary effort by a series of foreign service officers basically to do their job, take seriously their supervisory responsibilities and document someone who was not performing adequately. It was obviously something that caused the office significantly because none of the offices had the secretarial support that we would've liked to have had. So when you had one that was not functioning up to standards, it was a heavy burden. But in this case after I think three years the office was eventually successful. I remember that personnel rewarded this kind of bureaucratic heroism on the part of the sustained efforts of a number of officers by basically taking away the position, by saying, "well, you obviously don't need this person because you've been getting along without him." I thought it was sort of a tremendous and of course terribly damning example of the State Department internal management and the personnel system doing exactly the wrong thing. So that was one little piece.

Another thing that I remember well was an effort to try to talk the Coast Guard into a port visit in Northern Germany by the Coast Guard training ship Eagle. This is a tall ship, big sails.

Q: Tall ship.

THIELMANN: I was just remembering with amusement about trying to talk the Coast Guard into doing this when, there was some sort of inconvenience for their schedule even though they were going to be in European waters. It seemed like it was a real chance of them doing this, but I couldn't quite make it happen. The irony of this really struck me too since the Eagle was previously a German ship, which was seized as war booty. It was the Horst-Wessel, which was a Nazi song.

Q: Nazi martyr.

THIELMANN: Yes, Nazi martyr. I thought it was very funny that not only did we steal their ship but we wouldn't visit. I mean the Germans really wanted it as part of Bremer-hoffen or some local event. So that was just an amusing little occurrence. But I guess that's all I'm coming up with at the moment.

Q: Okay, well this is probably a good place to stop. In '95 where did you go?

THIELMANN: After the Germany desk I was planning on going to Germany. But alas in the strange ways of personnel, of two jobs that I had my eye on, one was eliminated. The sure fall back went to the special assistant to the head of the European Bureau, and I ended up going back to Brazil as a political officer.

Q: This was from your first tour.

THIELMANN: It was my first tour, and it ended up being my last foreign tour. So back in the same political section in the same embassy-

Q: And you were there from '95 to when?

THIELMANN: To '98.

Q: Okay, well, we'll pick this up the next time at that.

Today is the 22nd of March, 2005. Greg, all right, we're off to Brazil. You were, I assume in Brasilia. You were in the political section. What were you doing there?

THIELMANN: I was one of the more senior line political officers there. It was a little demoralizing to me when I first got in the embassy because I literally was sitting in an office just two down from where I was at the beginning of my foreign service career in 1977. It seemed a little bit as if I was moving up the political ladder like one rung after seventeen years. That kind of overstates the degree of change. But all of us in the political section actually divided domestic responsibilities and foreign affairs responsibilities. So, for example, because of my background, I dealt with all of the political military issues involving Brazil. I was the one who interfaced with the defense attachés. I had some of the Brazilian political parties-and there were quite a few-in terms of keeping track of them and some aspects of national policies. So that's really how I started my three-year tour. I might just mention an interesting tidbit on the language front: I came back into a Portuguese refresher course shortly before leaving for Brasilia again. There had been a seventeen-year interval since I had last served in Brazil, and there was very little opportunity to maintain my Portuguese during that time. In the intervening time I had served in German-speaking and Russian-speaking posts. So it was a very interesting experience of trying to extract from the far corners of my mind those Portuguese words, and I remember one little problem I was having. I kept inserting like one Russian word in my Portuguese sentences, and the frustrated Portuguese teacher after a while asked me who this person was that I kept mentioning, but it was just a Russian word that was sort of mixed into a Portuguese construct. So I found that obviously learning Portuguese the second time was much faster than the first, and it was. My language was pretty serviceable when I arrived at post.

Q: Well, first who was the ambassador when you arrived there? What was the state of Brazil at the time and then Brazilian-American relations?

THIELMANN: The ambassador was Melvin Levitsky, and one of the interesting things about the relationship with Brazil was that during my first tour it was, one could say almost at the nadir. It was during the Jimmy Carter years. Human rights and nuclear proliferation seemed to be the main components of our Brazilian policy at the time. Of course the military dictatorship at the time resented deeply both of those policy initiatives. Much had happened in the intervening time. One of the things that happened was that Fernando Henrique Cardoso was elected president in Brazil, and his rule followed some extremely mediocre Brazilian presidents that were either corrupt or incompetent or both. So there was unfortunate squandering of an opportunity during some of those intervening years when Brazil did have a new constitution which needed some tweaking and reforming. But there was only a ten-year window for doing that, and ironically just as the president came onboard who knew how the constitution needed to be changed and where the reforms needed to be, that ten years elapsed. So he had to do it in the hard way with I forget what kind of a majority it was, but it was no longer 51 percent. It was either three-fifths or two-thirds needed, which is extremely difficult to get in the Brazilian congress. Anyway in terms of Brazilian-U.S. relations the circumstances were really very favorable for a significant improvement in the relationship because the president of Brazil had values that were very similar to our own.

Q: Who was the president?

THIELMANN: Cardoso. One had also during my tour Bill Clinton as president, and Clinton and Cardoso were very much on the same wavelength. I mean whether one wants to call it sort of the new Democrats or kind of democratic reformers or whatever. The same kind of triangle that made Blair a very effective European interlocutor with Clinton. So on a number of issues like nuclear nonproliferation where Brazilians had, one might say, a Gaullist approach of feeling the injustice of a regime that put nuclear powers into one category and all non-nuclear powers in another category. So they persistently and stubbornly refused to be a member of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty during all that time. During my tour they finally agreed to coming on board. They basically made the intellectual decision to abandon those elements that were interested in nuclear weapons and long range missiles. When they made a very effective agreement with Argentina basically to open up each other's nuclear facilities to mutual inspections so that they would eliminate any suspicions that either was seeking nuclear weapons and long range missiles. This agreement with Argentina in effect placed all the restrictions that the NPT would, but they refused to sign the NPT because it was a deep-seated emotional and historical position for them. But the NPT was one of a number of areas in which the long-standing differences between U.S. and Brazil started to close. I really see in a lot of ways the period as being kind of a golden era between the U.S. and Brazil in terms of bilateral relationships.

So just as my first tour there was a close hand glimpse of all the problems resulting from a deteriorating bilateral relationship, this time I could see the potential of favorable circumstances allowing for a lot of productive work by diplomatic entities. This included with us over that period a number of VIP visits, which would result in deliverables. I mean, Clinton made his first visit to Brazil while I was in the embassy, and his wife made a separate visit. The Secretary of State made a visit independently and then with the President and former presidents. George H. W. Bush visited Brazil when I was there. Jimmy Carter visited Brazil when I was there. A lot of other Americans came to the country while I was there.

So anyway, back to my job. I was in this very interesting job. For the first time in my career it was a job that did not seem to require me to come in every weekend like most of my other foreign jobs. It was not a crisis situation. But it was an opportunity for a lot of very good and interesting work. It was also a very pleasant family situation because my wife as a former Peace Corp volunteer returned to a country where she was quite fluent in the language, actually more fluent in terms of colloquial Portuguese than I was. She had middle class Brazilian friends in Juiz de Fora and some other Brazilian cities. This provided a useful opportunity too because the American embassy people would really have contact only with the elite, the power elite of Brasilia who were very rich and very privileged people or the lower classes who would shine our shoes or pick up the garbage and everything. There wasn't a whole lot from a Brasilia living perspective in between. I valued a lot having some contacts over the course of three years with my wife's previous Peace Corp contacts, who were schoolteachers and other people who would fit solidly in that middle class role.

Q: You had the political military portfolio.

THIELMANN: Yes.

Q: What was your impression of the Brazilian military. Had they really gone back to the barracks? Where were they recruited from? I mean looking at it as a foreign analyst, how would you characterize the Brazilian military at that time?

THIELMANN: Thinking back on it, I would say that the Brazilian military was pretty solidly back in the barracks in their own state of mind. There were a lot of bad memories associated with their period of rule even for themselves and the way they looked at things. The military there sees themselves as sort of the national savior, as different than the corrupt politicians and so forth. But they I think felt very burned by that period too because they looked back on it as a period that corrupted the Brazilian military instead of the military cleansing the country. They were sensitive to the human rights abuses, although not quite sensitive the way we would've liked them to be sensitive. I think they did not really purge people who had sordid records or whatever. But I think it's fair to say that most of the leadership of the Brazilian military was not like the stereotypical Latin American military that was interested more in suppressing unpopular movements rather than in some sort of national mission. They had a lot of kind of uniquely Brazilian notions about their calling to defend the Amazon. Now the threat to the Amazon they wanted to defend was kind of an imaginary U.S. threat.

Q: Yeah, I mean how we were going to take it over.

THIELMANN: Right, it was kind of hard to keep a straight face sometimes listening to some elements of the Brazilian military talking about U.S. designs on the Amazon. The Brazilians were very suspicious of even the most innocent things, the cooperative programs to work on malaria and all those tropical illnesses where U.S. military could really make some valuable contributions really to world health. During my period there there was a long running conflict over the Brazilian attempt to establish a surveillance system that would allow them to police air traffic over the Amazon in a more effective way called SIVAM (English System to Guard the Amazon). There was some corruption in that program too and there were a lot of suspicions.

Q: This is the drug smugglers?

THIELMANN: Yes, that was-

Q: On behalf of Bolivia and-

THIELMANN: Right, that was certainly part of the motivation. From a Brazilian perspective it was very much an attempt to maintain or even in some cases establish sovereignty over extremely sparsely settled region with indigenous peoples and others that one might say had questionable loyalty to the Brazilian government. During that period also there were insurgencies in Columbia and Venezuela that caused some border problems with Brazil - not arguments over where the border was because Brazil was quite proud of the fact that many years ago they had established borders with which all of their neighbors agreed. But it was more a kind of the spillover of insurgencies where the people would either want to use Brazilian territories as a refuge or would want to exploit one part of Brazil. Protection in the Amazon was really after the Brazilians threw off a lot of their silliness about the conventional war with Argentina which was sort of their "raison d'être" (reason for being) for many years. The Amazon really emerged as let's say, the core defense mission of Brazil that enlivened and gave esprit to a lot of the Brazilian military efforts.

Now Brazil's military also still had a counter insurgency role in effect or a role to establish order when police authorities couldn't handle things - a bigger role than the U.S. or Western European militaries had. But the Brazilian military was not keen on doing that kind of thing. It wasn't the same kind of military that some of the other Latin American countries would have. But it was a very proud military too.

Just a final thought about it is they were suspicious of the United States. Their egos were constantly bruised by having the U.S. prefer the Commander in Chief of the Central Command being their interface instead of the Pentagon. The word theater commander was very offensive to them. They didn't see themselves as a theater. So there was a constant struggle. They wanted to do business with Washington, and Washington wanted to go through the CINCENTCOM to deal with the Brazilians. The Brazilians harbor a lot of grudges personal and otherwise. A Brazilian general told me about going to the post office in the United States and someone wanting to sell him postage for Belize instead of Brazil. Obviously all these years later it was still bothering him that that happened. A Brazilian admiral told me on the occasion of a ship visit about the U.S. military's plans to invade Brazil at the beginning of World War One, which I thought was another sort of silly Brazilian excursion. Then a couple of months later I read in the Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute, a magazine to which I subscribe, an article laying out the U.S. plans for an entire Marine divisions to seize the northeastern part of Brazil in order to have a launching pad for the invasion of Africa. Apparently this was a real plan, and it was part of the leverage in the negotiations with the Brazilian government, which ultimately resulted in a Brazilian invitation for the U.S. to establish our largest air base in the world during World War Two, in Natal, Brazil. So the Brazilian admiral had it right. I naively thought the U.S. would never do that kind of thing even though of course we had invaded Iceland to take over airbases there. Anyway, that was the complexion of the Brazilian military when I was there.

Q: Where did the-

THIELMANN: Oh I'm sorry, one more thing. The composition of the military was increasingly middle class and lower middle class, a very different composition than the Brazilian foreign service for example, which continued to be a very much elite organization. The Brazilian military was getting to be the kind of place where people of color, that is to say darker-skinned Brazilians, could actually serve as officers, unlike the pattern fifteen to twenty years earlier when as some commentators noted that if you saw the Brazilian army marching by, you could almost tell the rank by the shade of the skin. It was becoming the kind of institution the U.S. military has really become - where merit was more important than socioeconomic background.

Q: Was the military tackling the way our military has women in the ranks?

THIELMANN: I think not the way the U.S. has. I can't remember right now what the legal rules were for women. But I rarely saw women.

Q: How about the Brazilian politicians? Were they a different breed than you'd found before? I mean, overall was Brasília really the capital by this point I mean in thought, in word or in deed.

THIELMANN: Brasília really was the capital, and that was a dramatic change between the late '70s when I was there and the mid to late 1990s. Brasília for a number of years was a very artificial construct, and the government had a rough time keeping the legislators in Brazil when all of them really longed to be back in Rio. I could never really get over the fact of their departure. When I returned to Brasília you had a whole generation of condongos or Brasília-born natives who saw everything about Brasília as being their norm and didn't pine for the beaches as previous generations had. Even the appearance of the city was dramatically altered. When I was there, there were still a lot of bare red earth and termite mounds between the apartment buildings.

Q: I remember seeing a movie called Our Man from Rio or something. It was a French movie. It showed all this red dirt piled up and these modernistic cement buildings.

THIELMANN: There were still a lot of city neighborhoods that were still to be constructed. I mean there were kind of vacant lots still when I was first there. When I returned most of the original plan - and it's a planned city - basically looking from 10,000 feet or a mosquito or a bird depending on how you wanted to look at it, but all of the pieces of that bird's body had been filled in the second time I was there. So even some of the shantytowns of the city of Brasília had become more established and looked more like regular Brazilian towns. Some of the ways in which the urban planners had unrealistically decided this is the side of the building where the people are going to enter and this is the path that the people will take walking to this building. Of course life had intervened, and some of the footpaths had been turned into concrete and everything. It was a more livable, less raw kind of place when I was there - a lot of tropical flowers and vegetation. It was really a very attractive city in many ways with a San Diego-like climate, high and dry as a characteristic.

Q: Well, as a political military officer did you work with our military to explain the sensitivity of the Brazilian military. I would think that you and the attaché had quite a job preparing visitors from Washington - particularly military visitors but others about the sensitivity over fleet visits, and everything else for them to understand that they're not just coming to another friendly country.

THIELMANN: Yes, we constantly had to do some missionary work with visitors, and we had very savvy attachés for the most part. Certainly the Defense Attaché was extremely good, and his written briefings for either the Secretary of Defense or visiting generals were always very good scene setters for them. So fortunately we were pretty much on the same wavelength on the kind of things we would prepare civilians for. But it was very difficult to get U.S. military officers that were accustomed to going around Central America ready for Brazil and to get out of their heads that, no, you're not going to just tell the Brazilians what kind of status of forces arrangements you want to have or arrangements for this or that. It was also similarly hard to acclimatize some of the civilians who would come to Brazil because Brazil is really kind of a great undiscovered country in the U.S. political mind. Brazil would occasionally have a crisis or something that would enter the minds of members of the National Security Council, and then there would be fifteen years during which they would never think about Brazil at all. The fact that half of all Latin Americans live in Brazil does not correspond to the attention that Brazil gets in terms of visitors and the time of U.S. national security managers and key decision makers. So a lot of what we would do would be continuing effort to inform and update Americans who were involved in foreign and defense policies on what the realities were. The business community of course always understood Brazil's importance because there were enormous investments there.

Q: You were there during the Clinton visit. How did that go from your perspective?

THIELMANN: It went very well. We had several so-called deliverables, initiatives, things that were launched in preparation for the visit and then announced during the visit. So we regarded it as extremely successful, successful at altering somewhat the Brazilian image of the U.S. as sort of a heavy-handed imperialist. Clinton because of his personal qualities loved the visit. I mean, Clinton, the musician, reacted very well to the African-Brazilian musicians that he encountered, and Clinton is such a natural in these kinds of visits. He could connect with people of all levels. He had a great intellectual meeting of minds with Cardoso, and yet he could just as effectively interact with street musicians. So it was a great visit.

There is one little personal embarrassment for me in that I believe that I was the one who drafted what I believe was originally a limited official use summary of the Brazilian political context and which was then used in a briefing package for American journalists. I'm not even sure if it started out being written as confidential or whether it was limited official use. But anyway, it ended up in the hands of the press, and they picked out one statement that I believe I had penned about corruption being endemic in Brazil. This got out to the Brazilian press, and, of course, they were extremely indignant that the U.S. would characterize Brazil in this way. It ended up blossoming just as the President was arriving. He ended up apologizing to the Brazilians for this characterization. I always thought it was an unusual and dubious honor to write words that the President of the United States then had to apologize for. Of course, on an intellectual and analytical basis, I stand by what was said, and it was not written for public consumption. Obviously I would've been more diplomatic in the way that I stated it, but this was a very consistent theme of our political analysis. If one looked at the Brazilian political picture, all politics is corrupt in a sense, but especially the Brazilian Congress is very much a function of - or let's say ordered by - money and influence, and the Brazilian political and business culture was really infused by that as well. So when organizations like Transparency International would rate countries around the world in terms of corruption, Brazil would usually rank pretty high. The Brazilians themselves in analyzing this problem would share a lot of the sentiments in their own analysis. But it was just unfortunately presented.

Q: Did you find being in Brasília a difficult place to sort of cover the country because of São Paulo and Rio or other places. Was it difficult to work out of it?

THIELMANN: I would say no, but one of the problems we had, of course, was as in most places the travel budget was somewhat limited. We had the usual sense that we were penned down in the embassy by the responsibilities of the time, and travel opportunities even when the money existed were more limited than we would want. The country's enormous. The land area is the same as that of the continental United States. We did have fairly good plane connections from Brasilia, but it was a challenge as it is any time you have a number of constituent posts and a particular challenge in the economic sector since the vital beating heart of Brazilian economy is in São Paulo, not in Brasilia. So it was a challenge, but it was one that I thought that we handled fairly well, and this is probably a good segue into what happened after I had been there one year. Our political counselor retired.

Q: Who was that?

THIELMANN: That was Ted Wilkinson. The deputy political counselor, my boss, moved into the political counselor position, and I became the deputy political counselor. So whatever reservations I had about that very modest move up in the seventeen years seemed a lot different after one year in Brasília when, as political counselor, I had more of an involvement in the management and the orchestration of political reporting throughout the country. I tried to be very conscious about orchestrating how we would report on national events, nationwide elections and everything with close coordination from the political officers in our constituent posts or in some cases with the principal officer who was the only officer. That was challenging and enjoyable because I realized that I liked that kind of coordinating, managerial function of sort of orchestrating how a number of posts do a coordinated and coherent job describing what's going on in the country to the Washington audience. There were also opportunities for me to travel to the various posts, meet with some of the people doing the reporting and make some of my own personal contacts. One of the most memorable of my trips was a trip to Marabá which was a city in the Amazon that had a real Wild West flavor to it. It was one of those cities where there was only marginal control by civil and police authorities. There were huge disputes over the ownership of land. There was an influx of poor Brazilians who had been granted little pieces of land along some of the highways by the Brazilian government as part of a land reform program. There was in the general region great mineral wealth, huge iron ore deposits, and it seemed like a real natural for me to plan a trip there with one of the political officers that was reporting to me as deputy political counselor. He was the one who was drafting the human rights report in fact and, since this was an area where so many of the abuses originated, we thought it was a natural for a trip that actually had us both going into the region through different angles. I went through the state of Maranhão in northeastern Brazil, and then I took a Brazilian passenger train that was run by a big iron producing company all the way into Marabá sort of an all day trip. He approached from a different direction, and then we were planning to spend several days together, but the ambassador originally thought this was too extravagant to have two officers going to the same place. We had to make a pitch to him with a justification to override his own reservations. It turned out that about a week before we were scheduled to arrive, there was a massacre of peasants at a rural road junction that became one of the most significant human rights developments in the entire year. So the timing of our trip, while fortuitous, was really the perfect thing for the embassy to report on this development including both of us inserting ourselves into the interrogation of some of the people involved and having that kind of first hand account. We got some coverage at the time also as being the first diplomats going into the area to investigate this and manifesting the U.S. government's concern about the allegations of what had happened. While part of it was accidental in terms of timing, I thought this was really a great use of embassy resources to combine human rights reporting, political reporting, on the scene with some of the let's say more academic or distanced commentary from an embassy perspective.

Q: Well, how about the local officials? I'd think they'd be kind of unhappy to have you mucking around there.

THIELMANN: There was a combination of reactions. Certainly some were not happy to see us. There were a lot of non-government organizations operating in the area that were very happy to see us, delighted to see some manifestation of concern for some of the things that they had been complaining about for a long time. But even some of the politicians were people who were trying to do their best in difficult circumstances, and they were not happy at all with the massacre that took place, and it was not as uniformly hostile as one would suspect in that kind of situation. So that was one of the highlights of my tour there. Another thing related to the human rights front should be said. The human rights report was still resented by the Brazilian government as probably it is in almost all countries. But we had a kind of unique glimpse there. Since I had this vivid memory of how much the U.S. inserting itself into human rights during the time of the dictatorship was resented. There was a fascinating meeting that we hosted in the embassy between the visiting former president Jimmy Carter to Brasilia and a group of Brazilian human rights organizations including representatives of the Brazilian government's human rights commission. The incredible thing about this session was people roughly my age in their fifties or in their forties telling Jimmy Carter about the importance of the U.S. position on human rights events at the time in the late '70s when there was a lot of open oppression. Some of these people who had been in prison at the time, others in exile, others who were now serving in government were part of the opposition movement and the pro-human rights movement at that time. So there was almost unanimity around the table about what a vital service the U.S. had performed in the human rights profile at the time. It was a good reminder that the way it seems at the time is not always the enduring legacy of a particular policy.

Q: No, I have to say I was in Korea at the time in the late '70s during the Carter thing, and we had North Korea thirty miles to the north, and so many divisions poised to come in. We were very unhappy with this. Why are we monkeying around with human rights? We've got a real problem here but in the long run, I mean it took time but it has become part of the vocabulary, world vocabulary.

THIELMANN: Yes, the human rights report is something that a lot of people turn to. Amnesty International does one too, but the U.S. government does have certain sources that others don't have, and so it's become a much quoted reference document.

Q: Did you have a problem with the human rights report while you were there?

THIELMANN: I would say we were quite successful, successful also in getting it through the Department, which is always a challenge.

Q: That's the real negotiations.

THIELMANN: And also in not arousing more than the usual kind of grumbling about hypocrisy, and I'm quite proud of it. I mean the glory goes to the drafter really. But I feel very good about it not being vulnerable to attack. We, no one really, found us deficient in our statement of facts.

Q: Where were students going at this time? Were they going to Europe or were they going to the United States? Where was the flow of young people going?

THIELMANN: At my time students were still going to the United States overwhelmingly, and this was very significant because in another generation there was a whole series of Brazilian intellectuals who were educated in Europe, and Cardoso was a good example of that. I mean, he was very French-oriented in terms of his education. Even though he later spent time in the United States while he was in exile from earlier Brazilian military governments. But there's a strong sort of European continental Brazilian intellectual thrust, which of course originates in the fact that the colonizer was Portugal, but it kind of extends into a broader European intellectual thrust.

Q: You've said an awful lot when you get into intellectual thinking centered in France, in Paris.

THIELMANN: Yes, I think that's right. Culturally and temperamentally Brazilians were quite happy throughout the Latin-speaking world, and Italy would be another place, but in terms of the intellectual centers I think more Paris and secondarily Portugal in terms of the traditional education of the Brazilian elite. But the U.S. was still a very powerful magnet when I was there, and since I left of course, I have wondered about how our visa restrictions have changed that now.

Q: It's a concern. Did you find when dealing with Brazilian politicians and the military that they understood the United States? This was always a problem. America's a complex country, and our politics are difficult for an American to understand and yet they drive what we do, and it's nice to have a political body that understands at least where you are coming from. Did you find this?

THIELMANN: I found what I usually find in other countries - that the understanding of the United States and all of its complexities even among educated natives is not very astute. In the case of Brazil, though, there was so much more Brazilian understanding of the U.S. than there was American understanding of Brazil. Put in that comparative context, I would say the Brazilians seemed to actually understand the United States fairly well. In terms of the Brazilian elite, not only had they been to the United States, but their kids were sort of raised in Disneyworld or so it seemed. They, the Brazilians, visiting the United States absolutely loved New York City. California, or let's say the more cosmopolitan coastal U.S. was something the influential Brazilians, had a lot of personal contact with. They still had kind of a Hollywood version of the United States in many ways. As my wife told me when she first went to Brazil, in the smaller villages and even some of the larger cities in the rural areas, they were shocked to see that she didn't have blonde hair. I mean, there was that kind of very simplistic image of the United States. Even in the more sophisticated circles that I would run in, there was often surprise when the Americans did something that didn't fit the stereotype of a kind of heavy-handed imperialistic approach to issues. So it's hard to say the Brazilians really understood the U.S. and all of its nuances, but, in comparison with some of the other countries that I've served in, they had a pretty good knowledge of their big brother to the north.

Q: How Latin American was Brazil? I mean how much did they look to their other neighbors or were they really a different world and these just happened to be appendages onto their geographic position?

THIELMANN: I think Brazil is a place unto itself in many ways, but it is also increasingly a Latin American country. There was always a lot of similarities, of course, but in terms of Brazilian consciousness, they were bigger and better than their neighbors. So they would almost be offended to see themselves as just one of several South American countries. Yet politically speaking the Brazilians realized that their own weight is not always sufficient enough to get our attention or to lobby effectively for political change or economic change. So before I arrived in Brazil the founding of Mercosur [Spanish: Mercado Común del Sur; English: Southern Common Market] or as the Brazilians would say Mercosul ["Mercado Comum do Sul"]-

Q: That was-

THIELMANN: The Spanish would say Mercosur.

Q: The common market of-

THIELMANN: The common market of Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and I guess Paraguay [Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay]. I've forgotten now. This was something the Brazilians were very serious about. They wanted economic integration to occur there before NAFTA or before a hemispheric integration occurred, and they were trying to woo the Chileans in that direction.

Q: Well, were they looking at, you know, the Chilean model which seems to be the most successful one in that whole area. Were you hearing things of envy about Chile or inquiries? Obviously the size difference is tremendous.

THIELMANN: I think intellectually there was interest in that. But the Brazilians were so proud of being Brazilians that it's very hard for them to envy any of their neighbors. There's this long rivalry with the Argentineans, and the Argentineans were kind of proud, sort of European-South Americans, and would have a little bit of that kind of racist looking down at the Brazilians as being this horrible mix of races and disorderly people. The Brazilians, so many of them, saw virtue in their mixed blood and in their dynamism and had their own reasons for not seeing the Argentineans as a model for them, but I think that it almost goes the same way with Chile too. I mean Chile and Argentina are both kind of heavily European racial kind of places in a more temperate climate zone, and Brazil didn't necessarily see models in these countries as being directly applicable to them.

Q: Did Mexico play very much of a role or is too far away?

THIELMANN: I'd say it was just too far away. The real economic powerhouses are Mexico and Brazil now. I mean in a lot of ways they're in kind of the same category. Also in their suspicious and defensive attitude about the United States, they're in the same category. So Brazil and Mexico would often have common cause in political attitudes and positions, but it was really too far away. Brazilians to the extent that they see themselves integrated in a region of the world are South Americans and have much less sort of kinship with Central Americans or Mexicans. However there is also a consciousness about being part of the hemisphere, and one can see right now in the large Brazilian contingent in Haiti that Brazil does take it's OAS [Organization of American States] role and the hemispheric role seriously.

Q: What about other embassies there? Often the American embassy is the embassy the other embassies come to to get information and all that. Were there other embassies, i.e., those of countries playing a role like European Union or anything like that?

THIELMANN: I think that's true on economic issues. I mean there were European Union representatives. I wasn't as close on economic issues. So I would say from my political perspective we had good and friendly relations with a number of other embassies there, and the ambassador certainly met with some of his colleagues. But I wouldn't say that we relied too heavily on them. The Canadian embassy or some of the Scandinavian embassies or the European embassies that tried to keep track of political developments would certainly be worth talking to in terms of getting their perspective or maybe hearing from some of the people that they had spoken with. But in general we had so many more people to cover the issues, and there was such a difference in scale that we could do a lot of things that the other embassies really couldn't do. It wasn't the kind of relationship you would have had with the embassies that were of roughly of equal size.

Q: Given the seventeen-year difference, you arrived there in '95 and all, the communication revolution really had hit by that time - the ability to email, telephone easily and all that - how does that affect your operation?

THIELMANN: The question of communications was a very dramatic difference between my two tours. I remember well a little ways into my first tour we started getting a summary of the Walter Cronkite evening news program. I remember that that was kind of our connection with developments in the United States or it was a much better way to find out about what was happening. I think the whole week was condensed into an hour, and we would play it over lunch at the cafeteria. Telephone service was not very good when I was there before, and it was very expensive to call the United States. So we were really connected only by letters with home. When I returned, of course, cable news was big. We had a choice of a lot of Brazilian television stations, many of which were quite sophisticated and produced soap operas for export to all kinds of other countries. The Brazilians themselves were extraordinarily well plugged in. I'm obviously talking now about the elite, but even middle class Brazilians had discovered the cell phone, and I think the Brazilians took to cell phones like almost no other culture has. One would see them everywhere, and the Brazilians would like to talk and keep in touch with people by phone. I think cell phone use increased exponentially. So the country was much more in touch with itself and the outside world when I was there than previously.

Q: What about dealing with Washington? I mean, it would appear that fast communications and all this would mean that Washington didn't really need to have an embassy because it could all be done by fax or telephone or what have you. But I've heard on the ground that actually it means the embassy sometimes has a greater role in presenting things and all because it can get into the planning stage of presenting a demarche or what have you rather than getting it and not being able to have that input. Did that affected you at all?

THIELMANN: Brazil was still far enough away and enough off the beaten track that I felt our embassy there and the constituent post still played a pretty central role. I mean as I said before I thought that Brazil only sporadically entered the consciousness of high ranking Americans, and so that really left to the ambassador more of the business than would be the case in some other countries. So I felt that we had a little bit more leash on some of the initiatives than we might have had in other places. Most embassy officers felt that we knew better than Washington about how these things should be handled in the field.

Q: Well, then you left there in '98.

THIELMANN: Right.

Q: Where did you go?

THIELMANN: In '98 I went back to the Intelligence Bureau, the same office in the intelligence bureau that I had worked in earlier in the decade, 1990-1993. The office name had changed shortly before I left the first time to the Office of Analysis for Strategic Proliferation and Military Affairs. But the office, let me back up here. The office when I first came to it was called Strategic Forces Analysis. It had incorporated proliferation increasingly as time passed, and it became less just an office that would analyze what the status of Soviet strategic forces was. The important thing that changed in terms of the responsibilities of the office since I was there before is that another office in State Department Intelligence Bureau, INR, had merged with the office I was going into. Basically it was the part of INR's activities that monitored political-military developments. Conventional military forces that used to have their own separate office became part of SPM (Strategic Proliferation and Military Affairs). The strategic analysis part of it and the proliferation analysis part of it were basically exactly the same as when I left. I even went into the same division, the strategic and arms control division that I had left previously. Before I had been acting division chief. I returned as division chief because I had been promoted to FS01 and that allowed me to take the division chief job. This was a very comfortable return because I knew the issues. I knew the people that I was working with. My supervisor, the office director Alan Locke, had been my supervisor upon leaving. It was really great to be back in such a comfortable setting, but intellectually stimulating because obviously a lot of things had changed in the intervening five years.

Q: You did this from when to when?

THIELMANN: I did it from 1998 to 2002. The experience there really can be bifurcated by me becoming the office director. So I was really division chief for two years, and then I was office director for two years. The circumstances of me becoming office director probably are worth mentioning because it involved the notorious disappearance of a laptop. That was from this office.

Q: Let's do up to '98 to 2000 and then we come to the-. How was the strategic situation, what were we seeing?

THIELMANN: Well, by this time we were still monitoring the START II treaty and its painful way through the Russian Duma, where a lot of Russian nationalists were raising objections to what they saw as the unfairness of a treaty that they felt really had been dictated by the United States as winner of the Cold War and as the country that held all the cards in the late '80s and early 1990s. From an analytical perspective I think we felt that in some sense the U.S. was reaping what we had sown. We were so eager to get the best possible treaty for ourselves, which is to say one that allowed for a strategic force structure that was really the one we wanted one that depended on sea-based systems, discriminated against large multiple warhead land-based systems and at levels that the U.S. wanted, that is higher levels than what the Russians would have probably agreed to. That really violates one of the major principles of negotiations - that you want to negotiate agreements which both sides see as in their own interests. Now the truth is that at this point because the Russian economy and the Russian political order were in such sad shape and because they really had no alternative recourse this treaty was still a deal for the Russians. They couldn't really exploit the kind of opportunities that they would have had and a treaty that they would've written because they just didn't have the resources anymore. But that doesn't really answer the emotions that the Russians had. Because the United States was so insistent on pursuing its strategic defense initiative or missile defense program, we basically lost what eventually became the opportunity to get START II. I mean, ultimately the Russians agreed to it, did the rational thing. But they conditioned it on the U.S. not going forward with missile defenses because obviously strategic missile defenses can recalibrate all of the strategic calculations and the Russians had agreed to START II on the assumption that the anti-ballistic missile treaty would remain in force. So that was the overall background. During this period the Russians very slowly and reluctantly agreeing to the strategic arms agreement that had been negotiated previously, agreeing to ratify it on the condition that we would stick with the ABM treaty, which then the administration decided not to do so. But during 1998 to 2000 we were still in the process of trying to get the Russians to ratify START II. We were going forward with a strategic defense initiative, but we still hadn't committed to deployment.

In the world of nuclear weapons there were two for all practical purposes, only two nuclear powers. It was the U.S. and the Russians each with some 6000 nuclear warheads. The second tier of nuclear powers were Britain, France and China, not one of which had more than two or three hundred nuclear weapons. The Chinese in terms of the kind of long-range nuclear weapons that would threaten the continental United States, had only about 20. So it was still very lopsided in terms of the focus of our attention on who had the nuclear weapons and where the threats to the United States would be. In terms of the energies of the policymakers proliferation was a major concern and it was during this period of time that the Indians and the Pakistanis were for the first time developing nuclear weapons. They tested their first nuclear weapons in the spring of 1998 right before I went to work in the office. It was certainly one of our responsibilities too to look at these emerging nuclear powers. Because of my previous involvement and expertise on missile development, the threat posed to the United States from other countries who were developing or who had long-range ballistic missiles was a major part of our work at that time. I personally was very much involved in a series of national intelligence estimates written on the foreign ballistic missile threat, the first one in 1999. Then there was one in 2000 which was a subset of the major thrust of this yearly estimate that at that time was oriented to how other countries were reacting to our strategic missile defense plans and what the impact of the U.S. moving forward on that and getting out of the ABM treaty would be. So both of those estimates took a lot of time, and a lot of people were saying at the time that up until the Iraq national intelligence estimates they were by far the most important estimates that were done during those years.

Q: How did you see a change in raw intelligence that was coming in?

THIELMANN: I would say there was less of a change in raw intelligence coming in than there was in the political spin that the agency put on the raw intelligence. There was a reaction, I would call it an overreaction, in the 1999 estimate to the last time that the intelligence community had looked at this subject, which was 1995. At that time they looked fifteen years out as they usually do and said that in some senses the coast is clear here that North Korea is the only country with the potential of getting a long-range sort of intercontinental ballistic missile during that timeframe. They said some more specific things about how North Korea would evolve. But what happened after the 1995 estimate was that the North Koreans tested a system, Taepodong I, in 1998, which then in combination with the Rumsfeld condition report on the foreign ballistic missile threat was kind of a team B alarmist version in reaction to what they perceived as an overly sanguine intelligence community look in 1995. The combination of that Rumsfeld commission report and the North Korean test which involved some genuine surprise from the intelligence community because it involved the third stage of the missile. It was actually a device to allow the North Koreans to launch a satellite which failed. But the first and second stages did not fail. I mean they were successful, and it raised all kinds of alarm that any country which can put a satellite in space can essentially put a warhead on the other side of the planet. That's sort of the physics of the matter. It was that third stage and the space launched element which allowed Rumsfeld and the highly defensive intelligence community to do a national intelligence estimate, which took a major turn from what the intelligence community had been saying in 1995. It did so by basically changing some definitions and changing some criteria that were not evident to people other than the specialists. As one example, the time in the evolution of a missile system at which we say that the system is operational or to put it another way that it actually constitutes a threat was changed to move up much closer to the present time than it had traditionally. So all of a sudden in the way that Rumsfeld, or the senior management of the national intelligence council producing the national intelligence estimate, would talk about this these countries that had been distant potential threats became within five years threats. The Rumsfeld commission said that any country that had an infrastructure that could produce a SCUD missile with a range of 300 to 600 kilometers could, within five years of a decision to do so, also produce an intercontinental ballistic missile to throw a nuclear warhead, a claim which in terms of the way it was presented I thought was preposterous. INR that I was representing on the national intelligence committee basically said so. We disagreed with the main thrust of both the Rumsfeld commission report and the national intelligence estimate, which was unfortunately aping what the Rumsfeld commission report said. So you had a little bit of the 1980 sequence of team B taking over the intelligence community and getting it to do things against its better judgement.

From my point of view as a participant in this coordination process, which lasted a period of months, what I saw was what I felt was a consensus around the table by the CIA representative, the DIA representative, the Air Force missile representatives and INR on what kind of things were likely. But somehow at the end of the process, INR was all alone in an opinion dissenting from the majority view. From my biased perspective, what happened was that the missile experts were quite sober and consistent in what they said was technically feasible and technically probable. The pressure by the Republican majority in the Congress and a willingness of the senior leadership of the CIA were such that the intelligence community basically delivered a product that was just what the Republican leadership wanted in terms of justifying moving forward with strategic missile defenses, jettisoning the anti-ballistic missile treaty which would place limits on what we could do on strategic ballistic missile defense. Again from my perspective I saw this as really a corruption of the objective intelligence analytical process and I was of course not in a position to do much about it other than to author part of the dissenting views that INR registered when the 1999 estimate was produced. But I did certainly take note of when that five years within which the Rumsfeld commission said we would be facing a world of many more ICBM powers would be up.

After I'd retired from the foreign service, I did a somewhat scholarly piece on how wrong Rumsfeld and the intelligence community were. But, even while I had my tour in INR, we could see that some of the alarmist predictions were not coming to pass. One in particular that became public so I can talk about it is that the intelligence community was predicting that North Korea would test an upgrade to that Taepodong I system that so alarmed people. They would test a Taepodong II that would not only have this highly theoretical potential of hitting the United States but would actually have enough throw weight to deliver nuclear warhead to at least Alaska, if not the Pacific Northwest. We dissented at the time and said we didn't think you could say that was likely by the end of the year, by the end of 1999 as they were saying. The end of the year came, it hadn't happened, and, of course, still hasn't happened today that this system has been tested.

Q: Was INR, I mean you but also the powers that be, were you able to be independent or did you feel pressure?

THIELMANN: We only felt pressure around the table when the intelligence estimate was being discussed. There's considerable pressure there. Some of it desirable pressure to come up with a consensus document, to get rid of some of the quibbling and to get something that is intelligible and coherent. So there is certainly pressure to do that. But there was also a certain kind of pressure around that table because you were dealing with the nation's leading experts on missile aerodynamics, the NSA experts who through signals intelligence had made determinations about capabilities. There's certainly readiness on the part of others around the table to say, "well, who are you guys in the State Department? We have the missile experts." Or "we have the hundreds of people who have been going through these technical analyses" and so forth. But I felt somewhat resistant to that kind of pressure because I knew that we had been educated by some of the same experts on what was possible. What we were really objecting to was the way that the facts and the best judgement of the analysts were twisted, misconstrued in the final product. A lot of it had to do with things as simple as how you phrased the key judgments in the summary of an intelligence estimate - not so much what was in the body of that top secret code word text but how you presented it - how did you sanitize this for Congress and for the American public? This estimate was sanitized and presented to the people and it said some things which I judged to be misleading.

Q: Well, was there any, I mean was there a sort of people going at you one. Get with the program! Get with the political thrust! But other ones with you looking them in the eye and saying, I understand what's happened, but this isn't honest.

THIELMANN: There was; both of those views were expressed. In terms of the former, it was a little bit easier to maintain an irascible minority position because everybody knew this is what INR did. INR frequently had dissenting views, and we really didn't care. We really didn't care if we were the only ones at the bottom of the page saying "INR disagrees." Of course from my point of view we were strengthened in that because INR cares more than anything else about being right. Historically speaking, I think INR's record of dissenting views, at least in my experience and I obviously have seen only a small fraction of the estimates during the period I worked there, but in terms of military technical analysis, I would stack up our record about being right whenever there was dissent. I would say we were usually right when look back historically. Our emphasis was much more on what was likely to happen than what could technically and conceivably happen. Some of this just has to do with the institutional orientations and biases of the organizations. I understand and tolerate and approve of the Defense Intelligence Agency being more interested in worst case analyses.

Q: Well, they have to. This is what they're defending.

THIELMANN: That's right, and that the worst thing that can happen is for them to have underestimated the potential threat and then to lose a war or put the nation in jeopardy and so forth. But our institutional bias was in terms of evidence and what was most likely to happen. We had to serve the senior leadership of the State Department that was concerned with using our very limited diplomatic resources to forestall likely threats to U.S. security and not to orient our diplomatic establishment against what had some five percent probability. So that was our bias, but it did result I thought in allowing us to always emphasize or point out when the others were going beyond the bounds of the probable and were misleading the consumers of these documents into overreacting to something that wasn't likely to happen. So that is why I think INR has historically developed a good record at being right or more right than often the majority was and why, when INR once again was going to dissent on a document, some of the others sort of shrugged their shoulders rather than trying to talk us out of it.

Q: Well, during the 1999 review, did Iraq come across your radar?

THIELMANN: It certainly did come across our radar, and even the majority view conceded that Iraq was not the first level problem. I mean North Korea and Iran were both considered more serious problems than Iraq on the missile side of it because Iraq was under extraordinary constraints. There was international agreement that was fairly consistently abided by to deny Iraq components and resources that were available to some of the other potential missile powers. The United States had also demonstrated a willingness to attack the facilities in Iraq as they did in Desert Fox in 1998 that were clear violations of what Iraq was allowed to do. Iraq for example was under a restriction against developing any missile with a range greater than 150 kilometers. The general missile technology control regime restraints were 300 kilometers. So that's one of the many examples that Iraq was under even tighter controls than other countries, and that there were controls that were being enforced. So for all of those reasons we at that point were all in agreement that Iraq was less of an imminent danger than either Iran or North Korea.

Q: How about Pakistan at that time and India?

THIELMANN: Pakistan and India were also mentioned in the agreement. Because of their particular needs and because no one assumed that the United States was a major target of their missile development programs, the need for a intercontinental range ballistic missile, 5,500 kilometers, was not really seen as being a driving factor. So we were charting the Indians and the Pakistanis also in terms of their missile developments. But in their case it was more a question of what kind of medium range or even intermediate range missiles they were developing and they would have. But those tracks were also not exactly the fast track.

Q: What happened in 2000 and the laptop computer?

THIELMANN: Before I get to that, just let me mention the interesting thing about the 2000 national intelligence estimate, which again did an update not only of the ballistic missile threat but also in this case talked about the likely reactions to the U.S. moving forward with its strategic ballistic missile defense programs. This was also a very stormy estimate in which the drafters in the majority seemed to have the basic attitude that no one could do anything about the U.S. strategic ballistic missile defense program. Our allies in Europe are not going to get out of NATO. No one in the world can really tell us not to do something we want to do. Therefore, it's really no big deal. But I think that we were successful in getting into the estimate the annex that pointed out that virtually every country in the world had voted for the UN resolution which called for the U.S. staying in the anti-ballistic missile treaty and that we sometimes in dissenting positions would at least somewhere in the document capture the concerns of many countries about where this would lead if the U.S. moved forward with the program. So this was at least sufficiently sensitive. This was all in response, by the way, to an explicit tasking by President Clinton to the intelligence community to describe the likely reactions. The president ultimately postponed going forward with the strategic missile defense program on the original schedule. He said for technical reasons. But I have to think it was partly because of some of the reality therapy that was provided by this document in which we were fairly explicit about the diplomatic problems that would be confronted if we moved forward. I took note of the fact that unlike the 1999 national intelligence estimate, which included like a sixteen-page public summary, there was no public summary of this one at all. I'm just assuming that we didn't want to let the American public, the Congress and the world know that we realized how unpopular this development program would be.

So anyway, going to the laptop. INR, having very little resources to buy new equipment, really had no hope of getting a laptop, which seemed to be standard issue at the CIA. But CIA with its abundance of funds gave INR some money to have a couple of laptops, which were used. At least one of them was used to perform a very valuable function. We had people from the policy community coming down and spending time in our spaces, in the vaulted area, so that they could prepare for interagency groups that would discuss intelligence on prohibited materials being transferred to various countries. There was the missile technology control regime. There were restrictions on chemical weapons and chemical weapons components. These policies would have to start with the facts the intelligence community was finding out about who was trying to ship what. It was just part of the mechanics of handling the top secret information and who could have what kind of machine in their office and how the pieces of paper needed to be controlled to ensure that the people from the policy community working on these documents would do so in the right places and wouldn't take the documents with them and could not have access in the machines they were working on to all of the other top secret information that INR computers had access to.

So what happened here was that they could on the laptop prepare top secret information and cite individual report numbers and summarize the reports that were going to be discussed at these meetings. They could have it on the laptop, and it would be a closed system. So even though they were working with top-secret information, there would be no access to other top-secret information they were not authorized to have. It was kind of a neat, handy way to take care of the administrative demands of intelligence, or so we thought at the time. But this laptop was kept in the office, which was locked up at night, but it was kept on a shelf where people would come down and work on it.

We had some construction going on over a period of weeks and probably months in which one wall was being knocked out. The size of our conference room inside the vault was being expanded, and unfortunately this meant that there was sort of a chaotic situation in terms of where the workmen were, where various things were left in the office. So the very shelf on which the laptop was kept and the work was done was removed in the construction process, and the laptop would move from here to there and around the office. It was in the course of that construction activity that one morning someone asked, "well where is the laptop?" No one could find it. This didn't alarm people immediately because no one would've thought this laptop would be in any place other than the office. But it started quickly getting alarming when the laptop could not be found. I have to mention here that this was the time when I was still in the strategic and arms control division. So we basically didn't have anything to do with the laptop. I mean I knew vaguely about it. I'd seen it around. I knew that people used it, but it was the proliferation division that was really involved in all this. So I did not quite have the involvement early on in the disappearance of the laptop. When we in the office satisfied ourselves that it was not in the office, of course, we reported to diplomatic security which then wanted to do its own investigation before it confessed to the CIA and the wider intelligence community that we couldn't find this laptop. But they couldn't find it either, and after talking to all the people involved, they could not figure out where it had gone.

Then the intelligence community got involved, and then the FBI got involved. Before it was over, of course, this was a tremendous embarrassment to the State Department because it was the third in a sequence of security problems, the first being the disappearance of a big thick stack of top secret material from the office of the Secretary of State. It was on the desk of one of her secretaries, which I couldn't help but note was then awarded secretary of the year later on even after it disappeared from her desk. Then the planting of a bug by a Russian-

Q: In the paneling.

THIELMANN: Yes, in the paneling of a room. It was actually the office of the OES (Oceans and International Environmental Scientific Affairs) conference room on the sixth floor. I think this was where this happened. By the way, even though I saw in the press that this room was not used for sensitive discussions, I was in that room one week before all this came out to hear a presentation about nuclear weapons design. So I don't think that story was exactly accurate. But both of those things happened, and there was certainly not a consequence in terms of anyone being fired or penalized or anything else. But when the laptop disappeared, there was eventually disciplinary action taken against six people including my boss and the security officer in our office. I won't get into all the details. But it seemed to me somehow unfair in the grand scheme of things that the bureau was by far the part of the State Department that took security regulations the most seriously. We were always trying to enforce on the policy people the CIA handling instructions that we had a responsibility to enforce and were always sort of catching policy people for not doing what they should do, and we were always kind of lecturing them. Then within INR I think that partly because we had more top secret safes than anyone else and a whole lot of technical intelligence and control of compartments and so forth, I would say that our office was probably the office that took most seriously security regulations. So it was not a place that I would call lax before all this happened.

I still have no idea how it disappeared. The FBI has apparently given up on it after having offered a \$25,000 reward for several years running. I think they've given up on the case. Certainly I've always wondered about a possible role the people who were in our office doing the construction work might have played. Also Robert Hansen the FBI spy, that is to say the Russian spy who was an FBI agent, would regularly work down the hall from our office. He would be there every week from the FBI as their liaison to the State Department. I always wondered if there was a role there since he would've been someone who would've seen this construction activity and could certainly have used it to tip off people. But ultimately it was never found. We had multiple FBI searches of our office. We contributed a chair. A chair against which the laptop was last seen leaning was taken by the FBI for destructive analysis. We never got the chair back. We were all interviewed individually by the FBI and then one day summoned into a room and encouraged to sign a piece of paper allowing us to be polygraphed on this matter. My boss had been removed from his job because of this incident - sort of suspended pending the completion of the investigation. So I was already acting office director at the time, didn't appreciate the way the FBI had orchestrated this. They were supposedly just going to tell us about the course of their investigation. Then it became a sort of, close the door and here's a piece of paper to sign that you will be willing to be polygraphed. So I asked some fairly unfriendly questions about whether there had been any change in the determination that polygraph information is not permissible in court because it is seen as an unreliable, unscientific method. They kind of acknowledged that, and I conspicuously declined signing the paper in front of my subordinates to try to give them some cover if they choose to do likewise. It ended up that everyone signed the piece of paper except for the foreign service officers in our office, and the investigations were conducted. The FBI did not keep its word. It said that it would only ask questions relative to the investigation and instead asked questions going back to people's early life, have you ever done this and that. So I did not think this was one of the stellar performances of the FBI. On the other hand, since we never found the laptop, it's also a blemish on our office too, which can't really be erased because ultimately we're responsible for maintaining our equipment. Whether what happened was just or unjust, the main point was that, as someone who wasn't directly involved in it and as a fairly senior division chief, I was asked to take over as office director although I was still only acting office director because I did not have senior foreign service rank. I was only an FS01. But in May of 2000, I became the office director for what turned out to be a little bit more than two years, the remainder of my time there.

Q: Well, I think this is probably a good place to stop. So we'll pick this up in 2000 when you have become the office director after the laptop thing.

THIELMANN: Okay.

Q: It is March 29th, 2005. Greg, when you became the office director at INR, you were there up to the transition. Is there anything we should talk about before the new team came on board?

THIELMANN: I think for INR the trauma of going through a transition is somewhat lightened because in INR's case between the departure of Stapleton Roy as head of the bureau and the arrival of the new political appointee Carl Ford, Tom Finger, who was the principal deputy assistant secretary, stepped into the acting bureau chief role. That represented such continuity and was so comfortable that it was really about as seamless a transition between administrations as could be imagined.

Q: Well, when Stapleton Roy left, he was sort of made the fall guy in a way for this thing. Did that leave a lot of bitterness around, I mean feeling-? Whenever somebody is picked out, you think administrations sometimes like to toss somebody to the wolves. Does that leave an impact around?

THIELMANN: It did. Let me go back a little bit and talk about the Stapleton Roy's final days in the bureau. I had just a couple of months earlier had one of the most enjoyable travels abroad of my career when I accompanied Stapleton Roy on a trip to Australia, Japan and South Korea. Roy was going for consultations on intelligence issues with the Japanese, the Australians and the South Koreans. He brought two of us along, one of our East Asian experts and myself as a missile proliferation specialist to make presentations in these consultative sessions with our Australian, Japanese and South Korean allies. I was able to witness Roy in action presenting U.S. perspectives on these issues when he had served so much of his career in Asia. He had served as ambassador to China and as ambassador to Indonesia. He had served earlier on in Moscow, was extremely knowledgeable about issues and had a very rare historical approach to issues, a sweep, a vision, a way of talking about what had happened decades before and what was likely to occur decades in the future. You could see at almost every stop the people listening to him - you could almost see their jaws drop because this is just not the way they were accustomed to hearing U.S. views. I mean usually it was the policy people with a very narrow perspective - what needed to be done in the next few weeks. Many times the Americans had just arrived on the job or were political appointees who were seized with the moment, ignorant of what the dialogue between the U.S. and that country had been a year or two before. So Roy was a very exceptional diplomat and analyst. It was a great pleasure being with him.

Now this is related to Roy's departure because Roy was planning a trip through Germany, Eastern Europe and Moscow that he was very much looking forward to in December. I guess this would've been December 1999. It was in the context of making preparations for his departure from INR that he informed the Secretary of State that he would be on this trip and that Don Keyser, his deputy who was really his number two in the bureau, would be taking his place while he was gone. Now Don was one of six people who had been cited for having some kind of responsibility in the disappearance of the laptop. In Don's case it was really kind of the captain of the ship model because he was the person who had been there before Roy arrived. Roy was not there when the laptop disappeared, and Don was supposedly held responsible for something that happened even though there wasn't really anything specific to cite him for. He was under that cloud. Stapleton Roy certainly had no loss of confidence whatsoever in Keyser, but Secretary Albright said that it was really not acceptable for him to put Keyser in charge of the bureau under these circumstances even for that temporary period of time. This is all second hand of course, but my understanding is that Roy told the Secretary that he had complete confidence in Keyser. He had specifically chosen Keyser for that position when he came and if the Secretary didn't have confidence in Keyser, then Roy felt that he couldn't continue to serve in that position. So the Secretary allegedly said, "well, then you'll have to leave the position." That was really the background to Roy's rather abrupt departure as head of INR.

This was a big blow to the Bureau because I think most of us felt that Roy lent considerable prestige and weight to the bureau. I mean most of us had a fairly high opinion of the bureau with or without Roy. But he was just sort of icing on the cake, considerable intellectual weight at the top of it. So his abrupt departure I think gave a lot of us a feeling of what it must have been like earlier in the 1950s during the purge of Americans from the State Department who were allegedly not American enough during the House Un-American Activities Committee era, the McCarthy era.

Q: McCarthy.

THIELMANN: The ironic twist about that and one of the reasons I use it to say it gives us a slight flavor of it, is that Roy was one of the young Americans who grew up in China, the son of missionary parents with a native ability in Chinese.

John Service and John Patton Davies were some of the other foreign service officers who were purged. A lot of us felt that this was really a political purge that had nothing to do with Roy's capabilities. In fact he was, he was in effect being purged for his loyalty to someone that he had a great deal of trust in. So that was the nature of Roy's departure. It left a lot of very bad feelings behind I think, feelings that the Secretary had for whatever reasons-the suspicion was for political reasons, political survival reasons-dumped one of the finest foreign service officers we had and someone who some people felt would have been the logical successor, as one of the career ambassadors for the number three position in the State Department.

Q: Well, maybe I asked this before. But in case I didn't, I take it that Secretary Albright and INR didn't fit too well somehow. I mean, I've interviewed Phyllis Oakley who told me, she was there somewhat earlier, but she was cut out of briefing Albright. They left it to the CIA.

THIELMANN: Albright did not seem to have much of a personal connection with the bureau and seemed not to rely on the head of the bureau. Neither Phyllis Oakley or Stapleton Roy seemed to be in her inner circle.

Q: Going back to this trip you took, were you getting a feel for the Japanese and South Koreans on missile development by North Korea because for them this was sort of the soul of their existence. I mean, what were the North Koreans up to? What were you getting from them or did we know more than they did?

THIELMANN: In some respects we did know more than they did, and there was sometimes a delay in the Japanese getting information that they thought was critical from us. In some cases it was information that we ourselves only through analysis months after an event understood fully what the North Koreans had done with missile tests. One in particular involved a Nodong missile that actually overflowed Japan or the water between the Japanese islands. That was one of those cases that we ourselves didn't realize at the time when there was a lag between the Japanese finding that out. Both in the case of Korea and Japan there was considerable apprehension about the North Koreans. Ironically, the main thrust of my remarks during the trip was to remind our interlocutors that some of the tone they received from the CIA representing the U.S. intelligence community did not reflect our own assessments of foreign ballistic missile developments. That is we had a somewhat more sanguine - that's an overstatement, but let's say a less alarmist view of what was going on in missile developments than the majority opinion reflected in the briefings of the CIA and the other presentations that our allies encountered. So obviously in the case of South Korea and Japan, we were not going to try to talk them out of their anxieties. But we were trying to present as objectively and as factually as we could the pace of the North Korean program, the problems in their development program and not to present or imply as likely developments things that we felt were unlikely in terms of the speed with which the North Koreans could progress on their long range missile development program.

Another part of this trip that I should mention though is, because of a coincidence in time, we were actually in embassy Seoul at the time when the first overland convoy to Pyongyang left the embassy. Just by coincidence I was there on the day this convoy left the embassy and then proceeded through the DMZ on its way to Pyongyang on the ground for talks that were setting the stage for a later visit by Secretary Albright to North Korea, which in turn we thought at the time were setting the stage for a presidential meeting with Kim Jong-il, which we had the feeling at the time would actually have allowed for a deal on stopping the North Korean long range ballistic missile program and their nuclear weapons program. But of course the election intervened and President Clinton spent his last weeks trying to get Middle East peace rather than trying to seal a deal with the North Koreans. Conventional wisdom at the time certainly was that the North Koreans would only make a deal if the president were personally engaged. Then of course the presidency changed, and the new Bush administration came in, and their approach to North Korea wouldn't be the Clinton approach even though they weren't quite sure what it would be.

Q: Well, you had the feeling that they backed out of all Middle East stuff. They weren't going to get burned by that.

THIELMANN: Right.

Q: If you let go it burns.

THIELMANN: Yeah, and the President repudiated Secretary Powell in I think March of 2000 when he basically said publicly that the U.S. would continue to try to engage the North Koreans. Within 24 hours the White House told the public that that was not the case. Then by my accounts for the remaining portion of my time in the State Department there was great incoherence in U.S. policy. Every time coherence started to form, there would be opponents of whatever approach or policy we wanted to adopt that would prevent it from jelling. In effect, the way I would characterize it, there really was no Korea policy other than sort of obstreperousness and derogatory remarks, public remarks on our part about the nature of the North Korean regime.

Q: On that, John Bolton was very much in that, wasn't he?

THIELMANN: Well, he was. Bolton would publicly discuss the tyranny in Pyongyang and both make comments and express policy perspectives that infuriated North Koreans and led to them labeling him as human scum and other non-diplomatic terms that were sort of probably a reciprocity for his own characterizations of North Korea. We did get the feeling on Korea that of all of the issues in which INR expressed its opinion of what was going on both politically and technically almost, the most sensitive in terms of the new head of the bureau, Carl Ford, were our views on the Korean nuclear program. I would not say that there was really political pressure to change our assessments. But we got a lot of coaching about the way we needed to say things so they would not be dismissed out of hand by the consumers of the information in the White House and elsewhere in the interagency communities. What it told analysts I think was that there were such strong feelings about, let's say the inequity of the North Koreans or the folly of seeking to negotiate with them that were clearly coloring the way the information would be received. I'd probably have to concede in this case-and this is one of the very few exceptions-that INR may have pulled its punches a little bit - not so much at the analyst or office director level, but at the senior INR level - about the way assessments of Korea were formulated because of the sensitivities. One can say that that's one of the values of having someone like Carl Ford in charge. He understood the sensitivities, but there's a little bit of regret also that by pulling one's punches the information may not have been as crisp or as easily understood as it should be.

Q: Where did Carl Ford come from?

THIELMANN: Well, he had a background. I think he started out in Army intelligence and he was in the CIA during the Reagan administration. I believe he was the national intelligence officer for the Far East. So he had long experience in Asia, and after the Reagan administration I believe he worked for Cassidy Associates which was a firm doing work for Taiwan. So that was his background.

Q: I mean, did you feel, what was the feeling when he was announced and first came on? Okay we've got a political - this thing is going to get political?

THIELMANN: There was a little bit of a feel for that as is really the case when any political appointee comes in. But I think in an administration that was perceived to be fairly ideological, there was even more concern that our analyses would somehow be doctored or twisted by the new leadership of INR. That really proved not to be the case. I think Ford although there were cultural and stylistic differences at the outset and you had to make the usual adjustments to the new person. I think it turned out to be in the end a good fit with INR, and Ford I think won the allegiance of the bureau by first of all proving himself feisty with regard to the other agency heads. Ford, by temperament, was perfectly willing to argue a case that was a minority position, and I think Ford also came fairly quickly to trust the analytical capabilities of the INR staff. So it I think worked out as a fairly comfortable period under Ford. Most of us felt most of the time that Ford was just like a non-political appointee in terms of doing his best to represent what his professional career analysts had found in monitoring and analyzing the intelligence.

Q: Did you get any feel for the relationship between Secretary Colin Powell and INR?

THIELMANN: We certainly had the feeling that Powell had high regards for us, and there were various alternatives. Obviously secretaries praise the bureau; they praise all of their bureaus. So you never know how seriously to take that. But there were other occasions in which we would have INR award ceremonies or other things when both Powell and Armitage would show up and spend a half-hour or hour with the bureau, and those were usually interpreted as events when he didn't have to do that. He had a lot of competing demands on his time. It was felt at the time that Secretary Albright would not have done that. It was noted that one of the only times the bureau could remember Secretary Albright being in any bureau offices was when she came to our office on a Saturday, I think it was, to satisfy her curiosity about where the laptop had disappeared from and was heard to make some derogatory remarks while going through the office by one of my hardworking analysts, who was there working on a Saturday.

So Powell gave every impression that he valued the analysis of the bureau. It was as is often the case like looking through one of those two-way mirrors when he knew everything that INR was thinking, but we didn't hear too much feedback on what he thought on individual cases. Every once in a while he would openly disagree with something. Other times he would write on the margin of reports or give oral feedback that he thought something was a very good job. But I think we could infer from the taskings and other things that he did value our input.

Q: Did you see an increasing gap between say INR and military intelligence or the CIA as the Bush administration came in or not?

THIELMANN: I would actually say no. I say that because I was in the hot seat representing INR in 1999 and 2000 when - and I'm realizing now that I may have given the wrong date. Obviously the election was in the fall of 2000, and the events that I was describing in terms of going to Asia were at the end of 2000. Now I have to remember where I was. If you could repeat the last question?

Q: Well, I'm just wondering, when the Bush administration came in, you had Donald Rumsfeld who was a very strong Secretary of Defense. There was a lot of ideology in other parts of the administration, not really on the State Department, which I think worked to its detriment because it wasn't playing the same game that the Pentagon was playing. CIA seemed to get on board a lot quicker. I don't know. I don't want to make judgments because I wasn't there.

THIELMANN: Yes, and what I would say about that is that I had noticed in the foreign ballistic missile threat assessments that I had been involved with in 1998, '99 and 2000, before the Bush administration came in, there seemed to be a senior CIA inclination to fortify themselves against the fairly conservative Republican leadership of the Congress, which was already moving away from what one would've thought their desire to please the White House. So my specific problems with the tone and the priorities and the somewhat faithless representation of what the experts around the table were saying really started before the Bush administration came in with what I thought was an over responsiveness on the part of the CIA leadership to Republicans in Congress. So in a way what I continued to see then in the first two years of the Bush administration were a continuation of the subjects that I had dealt with on foreign ballistic missiles and the WMD proliferation issues, a continuation of what I thought was too much spinning and too much alarmist cow-towing to those in Congress who had a particular agenda. What I didn't see at the time and what was clearly happening was that Secretary Rumsfeld had created an intelligence apparatus in the Pentagon which was apart from and in juxtaposition to his own Defense Intelligence Agency experts. So it wasn't so much that the DIA and the CIA experts at the analyst level were bending to the new winds coming out of the White House but that the senior leadership of some of these agencies was continuing to bend to the leadership of the Congress. There was a creation of new entities in the Pentagon, the Office of Special Plans and another office that, dissatisfied with what the experts, even defense intelligence experts, were saying they were resifting the raw intelligence, cherry-picking and coming up with a more extreme take which was then apparently channeled through Vice President Cheney, and created in effect a stealthy team B inside the administration that was outflanking what the career professionals were saying. It had its most dramatic manifestation in the use of human intelligence on both Iraqi weapons of mass destruction issues and the alleged connection between Saddam Hussein and the perpetrators of 9/11.

Q: While you were at INR did that come up at all?

THIELMANN: Ironically it did not come up directly. During my entire time there I did not even know about the existence of these offices in the Pentagon. I think that speaks to the stealthiness of their activities. They were not appearing at interagency coordination sessions where the intelligence community would be trying to coordinate its position on analysis or registering the differing views around the intelligence community about opinions. In effect they were not submitting their analysis and their conclusions to peer review.

Q: Yes, which is of course quite dangerous.

THIELMANN: That's right. They were doing an end run around peer review because in many of the sources they wanted to quote from or the reports they wanted to rely on and report to the president were from sources that both the defense intelligence analysts and the CIA analysts had deemed unreliable or proven unreliable or suspected unreliable.

Q: In the time you were at INR were there any changes in say the missile situation?

THIELMANN: I would say that there really were not dramatic changes in the missile situation during my last two years. There were changes in the perceptions just as I was coming to the bureau in 1998 because of the August 1998 Taepodong I test that shocked everyone.

Q: When the North Koreans...

THIELMANN: That's right, the North Korean-

Q: Shot over Japan.

THIELMANN: The one that actually was supposed to launch a satellite but failed. Since it was three stages and in some people's estimate would kind of be in the category of an intermediate range ballistic missile it shocked people and gave additional credence to the Rumsfeld commission report that had been released in the spring of 1998. But in terms of actual developments the Indian and Pakistani missile programs continued to move slowly forward. As regards the North Koreans' program, after that one test, they never tested again a Taepodong I, and they never tested the successor missile that the rest of the intelligence community had judged would be tested in 1999. Instead they froze their testing and still to this day have not tested anything more capable than that on the August 1998 test. During my last two years in INR people were predicting very dramatic and early progress in the Iranian missile program moving forward. Instead during my last two years, 2000 to 2002, we really just saw continuing work on the Shahab III missile, which the majority of the intelligence community seemed to want to label operational far earlier than the Iranians had worked out the problems in the missile, some of the things that we tried in dissenting opinions to point out from an INR perspective. So the real activity I would almost say, was in the minds of hyperventilating congressmen and members of the administration because they had their own agenda on strategic ballistic missile defense and wanted to raise the alarms.

One of the more dynamic developments that had actually taken place was that Chinese shorter-range missiles were being moved off of Taiwan. This too was something that during my time as office director responsible for analyzing these issues, we saw in this case the Defense Intelligence Agency coming forward with what proved to be an overly alarmist view on the speed with which China would be deploying these missiles. That's something that INR took a dissenting opinion on. Then when we got additional intelligence information that proved that to be over alarmist, we had a heck of a time getting the National Intelligence Council to take note of the new intelligence and to correct the conclusions that had been reached on the basis of earlier analytical reporting. That was another great lesson to me about how the intelligence community was always very eager and moved very quickly when we got new intelligence that showed the threat was greater than we had reported. But, when we got intelligence showing that we had over-reported the threat, there was a great disinclination to register that or to get any kind of information around to the consumers. It was almost as if we had hoped that additional events would prove that original overestimate to be accurate or that the actual events would catch up with some of the earlier projections about what a potentially hostile state would be able to do. It just showed me that the default setting of the intelligence community is on overestimates, on exaggerating things for some understandable reasons because the intelligence community gets really beaten up if something bad happens that it hasn't warned about. So you can understand why, after getting beaten over the heads and shoulders so many times in the past for missing things, it makes sure that it doesn't miss anything by overestimating the kind of bad things that could happen. Then it can always say well, see, we warned you this could happen. So that's the inclination and default setting. But it doesn't work very well in saving the taxpayers money by avoiding the U.S. building and deploying systems that really aren't needed or in helping the State Department that's really trying to deal with likely threats to hype threats that aren't very likely. It can create a misallocation of some of our finite resources.

Q: Did you have any connection with Congress particularly the intelligence committee, both members and staff at all and what were their influence? Were they another spoke in the whole wheel or what?

THIELMANN: The intelligence committees really didn't pay much attention to INR. We would often accompany the national intelligence officer or the head of the CIA when they would go over and testify to congressional committees. This is funny also because at least half the time we were not told that the CIA was going over there speaking for the intelligence community as a whole. It would somehow slip out or we would find out that they were going over and then kind of hurriedly send one of us over there in effect as a truth squad to make sure that they were not misrepresenting what the intelligence community as a whole said. On one occasion I was representing INR in the back benches at one of these sessions and the national intelligence officer made a reference to an INR dissent on this particular issue. The congressmen were very puzzled, kind of scratching their hair, well why would INR think that? In this case it was kind of hard not to sort of turn it over to me to explain why INR thought that about a particular country. But that was a really a very rare event. The members of Congress and their staffs very rarely heard directly from INR about why we analyzed things in a certain way. Having said that I saw a lot of examples of fairly faithful representation of what our opinion was by the national intelligence officers. So it wasn't that our opinions were constantly being misrepresented. It was more that the thrust of a lot of the intelligence assessments that Congress was being provided in terms of their presentation of the prioritization of U.S. intelligence concerns and everything, I felt was really not educating the Congress very well about what the line experts actually felt was going on and not putting comparable threats next to each other or I should say putting different threats next to each other so that the congressman would understand the sense of priorities. The best example really was in the National Intelligence Estimate on foreign ballistic missile threats but very much in the fine print. It was the notion that it was really more likely that someone could slip a suitcase bomb or a truck bomb into the United States than the United States would ever be attacked with a ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead. So that was an early reminder by the intelligence community - before 9/11 actually - that a terrorist threat or that kind of non-sophisticated threat was really a graver concern or a more likely danger than North Korea or Iran attacking the U.S. with a ballistic missile. But you sure wouldn't get that impression from the way it was presented to Congress and the way Congress reacted to this unlikely threat.

Q: Well, then was it, 2002 you left INR?

THIELMANN: Yes. I handed over the leadership of the office on July 3rd, 2002, and so that really ended my period of directing the analysis on things like Iraqi WMD. But it didn't quite end my knowledge about what was happening because after taking a vacation, I went through the transition course. I spent much of September then back in the office trying to clean out my safe and making sure that all those various items that I'd been involved with were properly handed over to someone else. So I was still in contact with and talking to the various other people in the office, which has some relevance then as the Iraq WMD intelligence war justification accelerated right after I left my office. I mean it was August when Vice President Cheney made his VFW speech on the need for regime change and the dangerous urgent threats that were occurring in Iraq.

Q: This was Veterans of Foreign War.

THIELMANN: That's right.

Q: To that group.

THIELMANN: End of August, while I was still in the transition course, but it happened very quickly after that. End of August, Cheney's speech, early September British dossier now known as the Dodge dossier. Then it was the President's announcement to the UN General Assembly in late September that we had intercepted aluminum tubes that were being used in the nuclear weapons program. It was in September that Condi Rice started mentioning mushroom clouds on the horizon, and we couldn't let them be the smoking gun. Then there was the National Intelligence Estimate released in October 1st and somewhat misrepresenting the line experts in assessing the threats. Things started happening very quickly after that. Partly as a result of the U.S. military threats, the Iraqis let the inspectors return in November of 2002. They were quickly denigrated by senior U.S. leadership as being ineffective. The Iraqis did their not very convincing report on what they had been doing. Then in December of that year in a State Department white paper the issue of uranium from Africa was mentioned. That's a whole mystery in and of itself since this white paper would've had to have been cleared by INR. Even though I was out of the office then, it became obvious later that this statement about why the Iraqis did not mention that they were attempting to get uranium from Africa, was not mentioned by the Iraqi voluminous report. An intelligence matter coming from the State Department was not cleared by the State Department's bureau. So a very odd thing. But since I'm already beyond when I was in the State Department, I should probably maybe go back to what happened while I was there.

Q: What about with 9/11, this is 2001? Did that have an impact on INR? Did it have a shocking effect or-?

THIELMANN: I think it clearly had a shocking effect. Everyone has their 9/11 stories, but I'll just move through quickly what was happening in our office on that day. There was one television in the office director's office, and one of my colleagues told me that they had heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. It may have come for the operations center, but because of that news we had the television on. Several of the analysts were sort of gathered around wondering what had happened. I think almost all of us assumed it was a small plane that had crashed into the building. Because many of us were watching at the time, we saw the second plane hit. I think it was almost automatic. As soon as that happened, everyone assumed this was deliberate that it was something very suspicious or something that would actually involve us as a national security matter and not just be a matter of idle speculation or something that happened in another realm of activity. Shortly after that, we learned that the State Department was being evacuated, and it seemed to happen very quickly. I'm not quite sure how many minutes elapsed, but at that point we really didn't have much of an evacuation plan, and we of course tried to get our classified material in the safes as quickly as possible. That was something which later on we were actually directed from above not to be too punctilious about - that life was more important than documents in this case. If we got an evacuation order, everyone should get as soon as they could and merely lock the vault and the lock on our outer office door and not worry about every safe and every piece of paper in the office. But on the occasion of 9/11 we were all being careful as we always were to make sure everything was locked up. So everyone was rushing around doing that. I remember my wife called just as all this was happening since she had heard about this and wanted to know what was happening on our end. Whoever it was that answered the phone said that we were all evacuating and that I couldn't talk now. Shortly after that the radio reported that a bomb had gone off outside the State Department entrance.

Q: A car bomb, yes.

THIELMANN: A car bomb or some sort of bomb. Of course this greatly alarmed my wife, this sequence of events. It was very annoying to me after the fact because I was making my way very slowly to her thinking that there was not reason for me to rush to the subways. It would be oversubscribed, nor to get in long lines at pay phones to try to reach her. She was of course imagining me dead while I was making my slow way back to her. What had happened? It seems after the fact that it was one of the F16s creating a sonic boom as they were overflying Washington providing air cover.

Q: I heard another version. I happened to be just getting off the shuttle bus from FSI (Foreign Service Institute) when all of a sudden I saw all these guards come running out of the State Department, out of the entrance there just as I came down and developing the cordon. I was going off to interview somebody somewhere else, and so I walked on, and all of a sudden I heard sirens. I happened to have a radio with earphones and I was listening and they said a car bomb had gone off. I thought "my God." I just was there and I didn't know that. But I'm told that they didn't have any plan to say what happened, and the closest thing they had was to say a car bomb went off. It would mobilize people to the proper extent.

THIELMANN: So that was actually told people officially.

Q: Yes. I mean, well whatever it was, their plan for dealing with the car bomb mobilized the State Department security people. It was closest thing they could come up with. They didn't have something about an airplane being crashed into you or something like that.

THIELMANN: Well, whatever it was, it further created confusion and anxiety, but what we did in our office was - I mean I was with several people - but our instructions were basically to go home and call in to try to find out what further instructions were. The interesting thing in terms of our office, we were to my knowledge the first office in kind of a military way to develop a contingency plan so that we had a place where we would reassemble a safe distance from the State Department, count noses and decide on further action. We were the first office in INR to really develop this, and I think it kind of became a model for the rest of the bureau subsequently so we wouldn't be caught with no plan as we were in this case. But on that particularly day everyone left at that point in the morning and did report the next day. But one of the things in my memory was how slowly the State Department reacted in terms of protecting the building from what we thought at the time could be some sort of car bomb or truck bomb follow up. At least in my memory virtually every other federal agency put up concrete barriers and, in the case of the military agencies, had guards with submachine guns before the State Department did. I think this was on a Monday and for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, it was basically business as usual in terms of State Department security around the building. One of my analysts, who had actually grown up in Lebanon, was sufficiently alarmed by the laxity that he said he wasn't going to come in until the State Department took the threat seriously. He wasn't going to return, which I didn't try to talk him out of. I did use him in my conversations with diplomatic security to try to get them to do something. I noticed then it was on the next Saturday that they finally moved some security barriers in and removed us from being the most tempting target by virtue of having the lightest security of any federal agency in Washington.

Q: What about your thinking? Within INR was the thought turned immediately towards Osama bin Laden or was it turned towards Iraq or Iran or what?

THIELMANN: I think it was turned very quickly toward Osama bin Laden. I don't remember now how quickly INR had reached the conclusion that it was bin Laden, but I think - and this wasn't my office's determination to make - but I think our terrorism experts fairly quickly settled on Al-Qaeda as being the most likely explanation. The main way that our office got energized on this issue was related to the attack on Afghanistan because our office had to or felt obligated to do an analyses of what the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan would likely have in the way of weapons of mass destruction technology or expertise. It was in this connection that we worked closely with the narcotics, crime and terrorism office in INR to pool our efforts to find out what the terrorist experts had to tell us about Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and their access to things. Then we had to tell them what we knew about the extent to which they would be likely to have or to have gained access to the kind of expertise or weapons that they would need in order to have a real chemical or biological or nuclear weapons capability against first and foremost U.S. troops just going into Afghanistan.

It was because of my exposure at that point to the evidence that I could after retiring then say publicly that the connection the administration was explicitly and often implicitly making between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein was not a reflection of what the intelligence community was saying at the time because I was very much aware of that in light of our own office's reporting analysis of the likelihood of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban gaining access. Obviously one of the first places you would think was well one of his neighbors that had a lot of people in the country who knew how to make chemical weapons or biological weapons and who had had a very active nuclear weapons program. So he was one of the first likely suspects lined up intellectually speaking. It was then that I learned that actually Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were mortal threats, that Saddam's secular regime was exactly the kind of regime that Osama bin Laden wanted to replace, that Saddam as a somewhat paranoid dictator and all dictators need to be somewhat paranoid in order to thrive and that supplying one of his mortal enemies with this kind of material was one of the last things he would be likely to do. So that was certainly our assumptions at the time and important to our own assessment that Al-Qaeda was not likely to have the kind of biological and chemical weapons that U.S. troops would have to seriously worry about. On the nuclear side it quickly became obvious from the evidence that Al-Qaeda just did not have the expertise. It was obvious before gaining any evidence that terrorists groups like this are not well positioned to pursue nuclear weapons developments. They would have actually to get a weapon in hand in order to be able to use it. Their understanding of nuclear weapons proved to be pretty rudimentary.

Q: Well, then you retired when?

THIELMANN: I actually retired on the last day of September of 2002.

Q: You developed a career beyond that, didn't you?

THIELMANN: Well, a career of sorts. To this day in March of 2005, I have had no salaried employment. I now am heading toward a job on the Senate Intelligence Committee, which hasn't started yet. But what happened to me after retirement was that I continued to make efforts within the constraints of security restrictions to make the point publicly that the administration had not been accurately reflecting what the intelligence community had been saying. This was even what the intelligence community had been saying, which was already an exaggerated rendition of what I thought the intelligence justified. But I started telling this story of the senior leadership of the intelligence community exaggerating what an honest analysis of the intelligence should have delivered and then the administration further exaggerating that already exaggerated intelligence product. This was all an effort to try to explain, on my part to the public how the U.S. could get it so wrong, and it became evident from the early days of the invasion that we had gotten it very wrong in terms of whether or not Saddam had weapons of mass destruction and whether or not there was a close connection between Saddam and the perpetrators of 9/11.

Q: How then, would your stand manifest itself and what sort of reaction were you getting from various elements?

THIELMANN: Well, I guess the other point I would make is that in some speeches to my alma mater Grinnell College first in October within weeks of my retirement, in letters to my congressman, in draft op ed articles all before the invasion, I had tried to make some of these points in a careful way so that I was not spilling state secrets. But I was singularly unsuccessful in getting anyone's attention. The Washington Post was not interested in my draft op ed in January which pointed out how even the term weapons of mass destruction was misleading people about the nature of the Iraqi inventory and the significance if they did have biological and chemical weapons programs to any confrontation with the U.S. or Iraq's neighbors. Then one week later, I'm sorry, one month later after Secretary Powell's speech to the UN, I wrote an op ed with some specific analysis of what Powell had said about the aluminum tubes and the uranium from Africa, stories that were the core evidence to support the administration's case. I mentioned for example Powell said nothing about uranium even though the President of the United States had just mentioned it in his state of the union speech eight days earlier. I noted how significant it was that the Secretary of State said nothing at all about one of the two pillars of our nuclear weapons charge, which was by far the most significant charge about the danger of Saddam Hussein. I pointed out this was probably because the Secretary of State thought that this was such a bad case partly because INR had told him that but moreover because I think he realized that a lot of others in the intelligence community thought it was a weak case as well. This was obvious since George Tenet had sent a memo to the NSC in October and at a phone call to the NSC in October warning them not to use this charge in a speech the president was giving.

Q: George Tenet, the-

THIELMANN: The director of Central Intelligence - not to use this charge in a speech the president was giving in Cincinnati, Ohio on October 7th. So that op ed was also rejected even by the Des Moines Register, an Iowa boy giving them in effect an inside scoop. It quickly became evident that the press was far too gullible about its briefings from the CIA, inside backgrounders from the CIA, was very excited about the upcoming game or so it seemed on CNN with all of its music of the upcoming invasion. The Congress too seemed to be terribly disinterested even after the UN inspectors had returned and were gathering evidence on the ground to fill in some of the gaps we had had and to resolve some of the ambiguities about what was happening under those roofs that our satellites had picked up or to what use those dual use chemicals were being put. The Congress never asked the intelligence community as far as I can see to update them on what we had learned by the presence of UN inspectors on the ground or what the significance was of Iraq reversing what was really the only smoking gun which was the testing of missiles in excess of the 150 kilometer range the Iraqis were allowed. Incredibly the Iraqis agreed to that under the threat of use of military force, and we were eliminating their entire arsenal of illegal weapons. But none of this seemed to have any impact on the Congress or seemingly on the press. It was only after the invasion and after U.S. forces failed to find any weapons that I got a call from one of the journalists that I had been pestering to ask me to say more about my take on how this intelligence failure had occurred. That was Nicholas Kristoff at the New York Times in late May, who mentioned me in one sentence in an op ed he had written. That precipitated a flood of press inquiries from various countries and from all over the U.S. to ask me more. I found myself to be really I would say the only official through July of 2003 who had seen all the top secret information and who was willing to say that what the administration was saying was not consistent with the intelligence provided. That was a pretty lonely position to be in.

Q: Did you have a problem when all of a sudden people started listening to you and they tend to cluster together? I mean it's a pack instinct, and all of a sudden you're somebody who they can get a few lines from, talking about the news media and all. Did you have a problem to get them to concentrate on what you really were saying and not try to run off and make the meat rarer or rawer than it actually was?

THIELMANN: Yes, there was occasionally that kind of problem, and of course they would fixate on one or another thing that I had said that seemed like a juicy line and then replay that a lot or overemphasize it. So one of the things you learn is that when you're responding to the press, you're not exactly telling the story with the perspectives and the emphases that you would like to see or have in your own head. That's one of the things that motivated me to write an article to the Foreign Service Journal about this sort of coming out from behind the curtain and the life of dealing with top secret information but not never talking to the public about it. I had the good fortune to be invited by the Arms Control Association to participate in a press conference in July.

Q: This is 2003.

THIELMANN: This is 2002, in July - to get a coherent package on the record so there would be a transcript of my own explanation of how the U.S. got it so wrong. That was fortunate because in subsequent interviews, the press could deal with one aspect or another, but at least I could refer back to my own words on what I thought the big picture was.

Q: Did you get any effort on the part of people still in government such as "cool it fellow, get on the team?"

THIELMANN: I think a lot of this was kind of in my own head. You're really very deep into INR culture INR of avoiding any contact with the press. I think that the foreign service as a whole is a little bit too deep in that avoidance of the press and contact with the public. I would note that a lot of other foreign diplomatic corps have much more integration in terms of getting their young diplomats as press spokesmen for embassies and that kind of thing, so that there's more familiarity with the public relations side of foreign affairs. But in the U.S. I think traditionally, and we'll see what happens a few years down with the integration of the former U.S. Information Service and the diplomatic establishment, we'll see if the barriers are torn down a little bit. But I think that we as foreign service officers are trained not to talk to the press at all. That's the main way you can stay out of trouble. Just don't talk to them at all. Don't talk to the public in terms of speeches because it can only do bad things for you. It's not career enhancing. It will just set off mines that will wreck your career. So those are very strong lessons. One of the things that means is that, if you retire and you start talking to the press about it, you not only have the anxiety about maybe stepping over the line in terms of saying something that is not just a bureaucratic secret but a genuine national security secret. But you also have that very strong sort of against the grain cultural pull that I am betraying the band of brothers here. I am doing what the members of the team did not do and looked down on. So there's a lot of worry and anxiety about whether or not your colleagues, your friends, your community is going to think ill of you or think that you are either grandstanding and involved in some sort of ego trip or else you're being totally irresponsible in terms of the nation's business. So there was a lot of that kind of anxiety, but I have to say that in terms of any direct feedback I didn't get a lot of negative feedback. I would hear either directly or indirectly from some of my former colleagues that I had not said or told one piece of the story exactly right. They would find often times that it was a reaction to the way the press reported on what I had said and that I could often assure them that what I had said was actually something they would have been comfortable with hearing but the press didn't get it quite right. But the fear of doing something that my former colleagues would not think highly of was certainly one of the things that slowed down my willingness to talk publicly and made me more circumspect than looking back on it I wish I had been. I wish I had been a little more explicit before the invasion occurred and a little bit more aggressive in trying to get my version of the story out.

Q: What was your impression of Secretary Powell during this time? He had become a great hero of the foreign service by paying attention to it as a former military officer learned to take care of his troops unlike practically any other Secretary of State. So he had that, and also he seemed to be on the right side of issues, but the Bush administration was not. But he seemed to have sold out or something. One has the feeling because of this whole episode of appearing before the UN and essentially putting his prestige on the line and his presentation proved to be basically false.

THIELMANN: I would certainly subscribe to what you said about the reasons for Powell's popularity. I really think that almost without exception everyone felt good working for Colin Powell - working under him as Secretary of State. He had a fantastic way to praise people for the work that they were doing to make them feel part of the team, to reach out to everyone associated with the State Department, whether they were the senior policy maker or a janitor.

Q: Well, he even talked to me at a reception.

THIELMANN: There you go.

Q: We had thirty seconds of conversation about oral history. Before, I never in my entire thirty year career in the foreign service talked directly to the Secretary of State other than shaking his hand.

THIELMANN: He had incredible charm I thought, and he put everyone at ease who was around him. So it was really a great period to be part of the State Department. I think most of us also saw that he had a very high common sense quotient, that he had a very good feel for talking to foreign leaders and how to talk with them, just as he did to us. So a lot of us saw him as an effective diplomat in that way too. He did not create any enemies through his manner of dealing with them. The exact opposite of John Bolton who antagonized people who might even have been in agreement with what he was saying. So it was because of all that high regard, it was much more in sorrow than in anger that we saw the Iraq invasion lead Powell into places that he shouldn't have gone to do things that he should probably be ashamed of himself for doing. Our assumptions at the time, and by that I mean really throughout my period as office director, 2000-2002, was that Powell wanted to avoid unilateral action, that he was genuinely interested in the UN security council resolutions being carried out, and Saddam Hussein contained, not removed from power. We assumed that this was an uphill struggle perhaps because of the others in the administration that had a much more ambitious agenda in the case of Iraq. But even though we didn't get a lot of direct feedback on, or even indirect feedback, on the nature of his conversations behind closed doors, our assumption was that he was the voice of reason on this issue, on many issues in heated arguments with a bunch of ideologues who had no good feel for the damage that would accrue to U.S. relations with many other countries in the world if they were to prevail in policy preferences. That was our assumption about Colin Powell.

When we heard through I guess Carl Ford, our bureau chief, that Powell said he wanted to be the smartest man in the room when the subject of Iraq came up, we thought that this was one of the easiest tasks we'd ever had because he was already the smartest guy in the room. He was already someone who had been chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Desert One who had a lot of experience professionally both at the NSC and afterwards with the very issues that were on the table during the lead up to the Iraq war. Powell had the knowledge of weapon systems, which made it a much lower order of difficulty in sending him memoranda and analyses on these subjects. We didn't have to waste time as we would - I don't want to say waste - we did not have to take the time or take the space that we would use for other Secretaries of State explaining what this kind of weapon system was or how military units worked or anything like that. He was for our office, the perfect consumer of information because he knew all this stuff. He knew it as a soldier, as a previous consumer of this kind of detailed information. So we thought we had sort of the best cabinet member in town for those meetings. We had the best consumer of our information. We had someone who had a natural sympathy for what we saw from the facts up kind of analysis. We felt that he was someone who wanted to know what his experts thought about issues, and then he would do often the logical thing in making the best, most commonsensical policy recommendation. So that's the background.

We also thought by the way that he was very unhappy with Undersecretary Bolton, that he did not agree with Bolton's predilection on arms control and other issues. But he was really constrained in the fact that Bolton was the White House choice for the job and had very powerful backing by Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld. So that Powell felt he didn't really have much of a chance, he didn't have much choice in taking Bolton originally. What conventional wisdom was in the State Department, what we had heard and assumed was that Powell was keeping book on Bolton's various outrages. We felt, month after month, Powell was one day going to go to the President and say, "I can't have this guy in my Department subverting my policies and your policy, Mr. President." That was our assumption, and we were wrong in that just as we were wrong in making assumptions about what Powell would not be willing to do for the president in selling his Iraq policy.

But I wanted to mention a specific that I can talk about better with hindsight about what was going on. This involves something that happens in March 2002. This was really at a time when we were still reporting as we always were on what we thought the Iraqis were doing for various illicit efforts or in programs that they were prohibited by UN Security Council resolution, by international treaty or some sort of international regime. This was at a time when we got one of those taskings from the Secretary of State, delivered through I think Carl Ford, but might have been through his principal deputy Tom Finger, with a tasking to us as the office that monitored how Iraqi WMD programs were doing and was the institutional source of knowledge on the history of the inspections program. Our office and another office, the Near East South Asia office of INR were tasked with coming up with an inspection scheme which Saddam Hussein would reject. I was flabbergasted to get this task. I remember sitting in an office and taking notes and nodding my head and leaving the office and then an hour or two later sending an email to the head of the other office director involved asking him whether he heard the same thing I did - that we were basically asked to design an inspection scheme that was designed to fail and that would fail in getting Saddam Hussein to eliminate his weapons of mass destruction. It was confirmed by this other office director, that yes, that's what we were asked to do. I remember communicating by email to our front office saying that I refused to carry out that task. I don't know if I had any right to refuse to carry out such an order. But I just thought it was just so immoral and so dishonest to be allegedly designing an inspection regime that was supposed to enforce the UN Security Council resolution but in fact was doing something which was presumably designed to give us an excuse to overthrow Saddam. This was in March of 2002. I look back on that and I have to think that this was Colin Powell who knew apparently from the fall of 2001, shortly after 9/11, that the U.S. was bound and determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein. This was Powell's effort to try to make that happen with the least damage to our relations with other countries, that is to be able to blame it all on Saddam through some sort of obviously unacceptable rejection of UN inspection regime. But that was just a little bit too much for me. In my email response, I was trying to be responsive and helpful, and I said, we will try to outline an inspection regime that will be sufficiently rigorous that we can have high confidence of knowing that Saddam is not pursuing the various weapons of mass destruction programs. This regime may very well be sufficiently rigorous that Saddam Hussein will reject it, and we can give you an assessment of that likelihood also - I mean, we in conjunction with our Iraq experts in the other office. But I'm not going to suggest a regime that's designed to fail in its stated purpose. That was really the way the matter dropped. We did the project as it was redefined. We gave a lot of specifics to our front office in terms of what an inspection regime would look like that had sufficient confidence or would give us sufficient confidence that the Security Council resolutions would be carried out. This is something that I have not talked to the press about partly because I guess I did not want to create inquiries to my colleagues both laterally and above me on something that was ultimately never really carried out in the way that it had been tasked. But it does tell me, I have to say that, this must've been something if I can believe the people who tasked me with the project that Colin Powell came up with. That was a disappointment to me as was his UN speech. My final thought on that March 2000 event was that within the last week and a half the BBC had aired a documentary on Panorama which quoted from a leaked memo that the UK ambassador sent from Washington that same month in which he was reporting on the U.S. determination to get rid of Saddam and the need to, as he put it, wrong foot Saddam in terms of the inspection - wrong foot meaning to trick, to out maneuver him - and it's very hard for me not to associate that with exactly what had come down to us as a tasking from Secretary Powell.

So that was one of my disappointments about the Secretary. But the other very big one was what he did in February of 2003 in his 85-minute elaboration to the other members of the Security Council, about what the U.S. intelligence information said about what the Iraqis were doing. It wasn't so much the specific information that Powell gave that I found offensive because in many cases he was reporting on fairly hard evidence about what we had seen. For example, we did intercept aluminum tubes that were bound for Iraq. Powell characterized the tubes accurately in terms of them being high strength aluminum. We did know that various precursor agents were going into Iraq that could be used in the making of chemical weapons. We did know about new construction activity at sites that had previously been associated with WMDs. So it wasn't so much the many the individual pieces that Powell was reporting. We did have those intercepts of kind of questionable comments prior to UN inspections. Many things were true that he conveyed, but what he said in and around the margins, that were facts. "We have multiple sources." All of those things that he said that helped emphasize or in my retelling helped mislead people about how you would put all this together or what these facts actually showed us. That was very disappointing because you can only see it in retrospect as a very skillful and slick oversell job, which certainly worked very well with the American press and with the Congress at the time. It didn't work so well with the foreigners, particularly those who knew the subject matter and knew the nature of his game. But most deeply disappointing of all was what he said about the aluminum tubes, during which he acknowledged that there was a dispute that experts differed on what they thought these aluminum tubes were going for, which was interesting since when the president brought it up in September, he didn't acknowledge any difference at all. He acted as if the mere fact that these were aluminum tubes, sophisticated aluminum, meant that they were going into the weapons program. But Powell first of all rejected what we had told him more than a year earlier that the Department of Energy and the leading experts in the United States said that these tubes were not suited for nuclear weapons program. That he basically sided with the White House and the CIA was disappointing but maybe understandable because of his political position. What was inexcusable on our part was the details that he gave here. I'm just a simple soldier, but he noted the U.S. did not use this kind of aluminum in our own artillery rockets, which is what we said they were being used for and what we now know they were being used for. He said the U.S. doesn't use this kind of aluminum, and he talked about a lot of other things, which made it convincing to the layman that yeah, that's really suspicious. But what he didn't mention was that we knew at the time that the Iraqis had reverse engineered an Italian-designed artillery rocket that used exactly that kind of aluminum, and in fact the U.S. did in some of our rockets use that kind of aluminum. If not artillery rockets then in helicopter-borne rockets that were used for some of the same targets. So that was disingenuous if not completely dishonest. That was very disappointing. That was really Colin Powell banking on his integrity and credibility, which were considerable.

Q: Oh yes.

THIELMANN: And misleading people if not telling them fibs on very critically important issues that any nation or any international community needs to inform itself about.

Q: Before going to war.

THIELMANN: Yes, that's right. So to me that permanently blots Colin Powell's legacy, and there's really no way that he can sort of wriggle out of having done something that was irresponsible in the extreme. I think that in his own mind, and this is armchair psychology, I don't think he knew or fully realized the extent to which that he was really telling fibs. I mean he knew that he was really stretching the truth as far as it would stretch and beyond. But I think he was genuinely disappointed with, if not extremely angry with, George Tenet in the CIA who he had relied on totally in those final days to at least keep him out of too much trouble. I think that he thought that he was operating in safer grounds in his spinning than he actually was. From what I've heard up until the time Tenet resigned he was still asking Tenet to explain himself in terms of the material that he was presented.

Q: Did you feel during this time or anything the hand of Condoleezza Rice, the head of NSC?

THIELMANN: I certainly didn't feel her personal hand except that I felt that at the very least, her level of involvement was inadequate given the importance of the intelligence community's assessment of the main justification for going to war, for leading a nation to war. That Condoleezza Rice would admit that she never read the INR dissent is not just insulting because I was part of INR but it's insulting to me as an American that the president's national security advisor would not read a conspicuously lengthy and strong dissent on the most important piece of the most important intelligence document on the most important justification for in effect a declaration of war. That seems to me unbelievable that she would not inform herself of what her experts were thinking about. Then of course that she would go beyond that. But to start characterizing in very inflammatory ways the significance of the intelligence document to talk about mushroom clouds and to make the misstatement at a very critical time that the only thing that these seized aluminum tubes could be used for is nuclear weapons, is just flat 100 percent wrong. That really to me gets into sort of a high crime and misdemeanor rather than just bureaucratic sloppiness.

Q: Well, Greg, I guess this, we might close at this point.

THIELMANN: Let me just say one more thing, Stu. When I reflect back on my two years as office director and what issues we dealt with that were really the gravest threat to the U.S., it's hard not to mention the India-Pakistani confrontation over Kargil and the fact that we had one million men in arms mobilized confronting each other on a border with both countries in possession of nuclear weapons. It was one of the things that our office was involved with on a day-by-day and week-to-week basis to try to keep our superiors informed on what we thought was going on in terms of how close the nuclear apparatuses of both nations were. I just mention this because thinking back on it, it was one of those ways in which I think our system worked very well. I think that we were providing a lot of good intelligence on this subject. You had significant involvement by Deputy Secretary Armitage and Secretary Powell on trying to contain the dangers to the international community on engaging the Indians and the Pakistanis at very high levels. I just mention that since so much of our conversation has been about failures and disappointments that here is one of those U.S. diplomatic involvements that I think did very good things for the world and ended not with a bang but perhaps with a whimper, which is the way you certainly want it to end. That left me with a very good feeling about our office's contributions and the contributions of the State Department on a critical international issue.

Q: How did the contribution work? In other words what did we do that kept the thing from going out of control?

THIELMANN: Well, I think what we were doing was the South Asian experts in the office of Near East South Asian affairs would team up with our experts on the Indian-Pakistani militaries and the nuclear proliferation experts to do what I think at one point were daily Sit Reps (situation reports) and regular reporting when we would get significant intelligence information to make sure that our principals knew how this slightly changed or added to our understanding of what was happening. So that again made Powell and Armitage very smart and up-to-date when they had direct conversations with the leaders. This involved travels to the region, but also a lot of phone calls most of which we didn't hear a lot of feedback about in our office. But we had to assume that they were more productive discussions because Powell and Armitage were much more on top of what was happening militarily in a region of the world that frankly doesn't get nearly as much scrutiny as Europe and the Middle East and a lot of other areas of the world.

Q: All right. Well, I want to thank you.

THIELMANN: You're welcome.

Q: Thank you very much.

End of interview